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Fostering Agency in Single-Gender, Middle Level ELA Classrooms: A Descriptive Multiple-Case Study

Jennifer V. Stowe

FOSTERING AGENCY IN SINGLE-GENDER, MIDDLE LEVEL ELA CLASSROOMS: A DESCRIPTIVE MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY

by

Jennifer V. Stowe

Bachelor of Arts
Bryan College, 2003

Master of Arts
University of Tennessee, 2006

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Accepted by:

Diane Stephens, Major Professor

Druscilla Barker, Committee Member

Mary Styslinger, Committee Member

Yang Wang, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

To the three great loves of my life: G.B, H.R., and S. G.—you are my favorites.

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ABSTRACT

Students' sense of agency or self-efficacy has been linked to student achievement levels (Goodman & Eren, 2013; Johnston, 2004; Skinner, Wellborne, & Connell, 1990). Research has also established that teachers position their students as having agency in the context of the classroom, frequently by the ways that they use language (Johnston, 2004; Paulson & Theado, 2014). However, little, if any, extant research describes teacher language as it relates to agency within the middle level English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Additionally, studies concerning agency rarely address the ways in which gender may influence the ways in which teachers position their students for agency. This case study provides educators with concrete examples of the language that middle level ELA teachers use to promote agency in their classrooms.

The researcher observed two middle level ELA teachers working in a single-gender magnet program. She conducted observations for two hours each week over the course of six weeks. After each two hour observation block, she interviewed the teachers after to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' perspectives, methods, and decision-making processes. She also asked explicit questions about the ways in which teachers chose to comport themselves with students of each gender. These teachers performed their roles very differently from one another, and their classrooms reflected their approaches. Based on her observations and analysis, the researcher concluded that the ways in which these teachers embodied authority in their classroom significantly influenced their students' opportunities to experience agency. However,

the researcher did not find that the teachers believed gender to be a significant factor in the ways in which they positioned students for agency.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AaL ..... Assessment as Learning

AfL ..... Assessment for Learning

CCI ..... Critical Civic Inquiry

CHAT ..... Cultural Historical Activity Theory

CST ..... Critical Skills Thinking

ELA ..... English Language Arts

ELL ..... English Language Learners

IRF ..... Initiation Response Feedback

MS ..... Middle School

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction to the Study

Hank, my five year-old son, frequently begins conversations by saying, "Mom, I have an idea." I always respond the same way, with the same eagerness: "You do? What's your idea?" By now, this exchange has become routine, and Hank uses this opening phrase with confidence, expecting my interest and anticipating the possibility that his idea—usually a snack or a trip to the children's museum—might soon become reality. When he looks up at me with confident expectation, I cannot help but feel grateful and proud. Hank believes, not only in me, but also in his ideas, in his ability to use language, and in his ability to shape the world around him.

Conversations with Hank often begin this way, but as I studied the relationships between language, identity, and agency, this simple exchange started to give me pause—How did Hank come to construct such a confident, agentive identity? How can I continue to support his sense of agency? How can I cultivate a sense of agency in my students? As I thought about this issue, I came to realize that when Hank he says, "Mom, I have a idea," he is taking a risk, perhaps a negligible one, but a risk nonetheless. He is sharing a part of himself, opening himself up to the possibility of rejection, and expressing his desire to act agentively. Sometimes, I remember this element of risk and wonder, "What if I were to respond differently?" To say, for example, "I'm too busy right now, Hank." Or worse, "Who cares? You're just a kid." It's painful to envision his

disappointed little face. However, Hank is a confident little person, and I imagine that he could recover from such rejection once or twice. But what if he heard that message everyday? He would be a different child—a child who does not have "a idea" that he is willing to share, perhaps a child who does not even bother to engage or imagine possibilities.

I have had such children in my classroom, students who did not believe "that the environment is responsive to [their] actions" (Johnston, 2004, p. 29)[1]. As a teacher, one of my most important goals has become to cultivate a positive sense of agency in my students. This goal has become central to me for several reasons. First, I believe that people deserve to be subjects, not objects (Freire, 2014). Although subjectivity is multiple and shifting, in many ways to be a subject means to have the power to name and rename the world, and before an individual can begin to do so, they need to believe in their ability to do so (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Second, I believe that agency forms the foundation for genuine inquiry in the classroom and the wider world. Individuals must believe in their ability to figure things out before they will try to do so. Research by scholars such as Bandura (1977), Harter (1981), Stipek (1980), and Weiner (1979) demonstrates that "an individual's expectations about whether he or she has any control over academic successes and failures" contributes significantly to his or her school performance (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990, p. 1). Children who believe that they have control over their successes and failures are significantly more likely to be successful than those who do not (Skinner et al., 1990). Thirdly, I work hard to

[1] Like Johnston (2004), I recognize that the term *agency* describes a concept very similar to concepts labeled *self-efficacy* and *sense of control.* Although these terms differ slightly, they all refer to the belief that we have the ability to control certain aspects of our experience or environment. Additionally, I considered the overlap between *agency, empowerment*, and *autonomy*.

understand the ways in which students perform their identities in the context of my class, and students' beliefs about their own agency always seems to be a central component of their identities. Finally, I believe that "growing" people who approach the world with a genuinely thoughtful, curious, and agentive perspective is the key making the world a better, more socially just place.

My interest in the contributions that teachers make to students' agency also connects to my desire to understand the interplay between gender identity and agency. As scholars like Connell (1995) assert, gender is socially constructed and flexible. However, a "gender order" exists which is "characterized by male dominance over women" (Holm, 2010, p. 258). In this order, masculinity is often conceptualized as "active" and characterized by independent, agentive behavior. In contrast, femininity is often seen as "passive" and contingent (Holm, 2010). Although the majority of schoolteachers are women, male dominance also characterizes typical classroom interactions: "as a group, boys dominate and occupy the most physical and verbal spaces in the classroom" (Holm, 2010, p. 258). Additionally, "in comparison to girls, boys receive more attention and interest from teachers," taking up a disproportionate share of teacher resources (Holm, 2010, p. 258).

Agency then, particularly agency as fostered by teachers, is likely influenced by interaction patterns influenced by discourses about gender. However, during my review of the literature, I found almost no extant research describing teacher language as it relates to agency within the middle level English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. I was also unable to find any studies that explored the potential interaction between gender and agency or the ways in which the gender of a student might influence the ways in which

teachers position him or her in the classroom. Because I am interested in in the interplay between gender, identity, agency and teacher language, I wanted to find a way to study the ways in which the variable of gender influenced teachers' words, actions, and instructional decisions. This was easier to accomplish in the context of single-gender classrooms. For example, teacher talk is often directed to the entire class as opposed to a single individual, and therefore, it is more difficult to observe differences in teacher talk directed to individuals of different genders. However, by conducting this study in single-gender classrooms, I was able to observe large-scale patterns and variations in the ways in which teachers comported themselves in boys' and girls' classes. Additionally, because gender was an already accepted way of classifying students in this program, I was able to ask the teachers about these patterns explicitly without seeming to imply that I thought they were acting in a sexist manner in the classroom.

The purpose of my research is to describe the ways that English Language Arts (ELA) teachers create and use Discourses[2] (Gee 2012) to help their students develop agentive identities within the classroom. I have designed this study to answer the following questions:

1) How do English Language Arts teachers use language and other cues[3] to position middle-level students as agents within the context of single-gender classrooms?

[2] Following Gee (2012), I distinguish between "discourses" or "stretches of language which 'hang together' so as to make sense to come community of people" and "big 'D' discourses" or "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities" (p. 112, 3).

[3] Specifically, I will attempt to make accurate notes of cues related to the teachers' *proxemics*, or their "use of space when around others," and their *kinesis* or "postures, positions, and movement" (Glesne, 2016, p. 71).

2) How, if at all, do teacher practices and teacher language vary based on the student or group of students with whom they are interacting?

Additionally, I intentionally designed interview questions to gather data that will answer the following question, which is beyond the scope of the present study but may be the subject of future analysis: What is the relationship between middle-level English Language Arts teachers' expectations and goals for their students and the ways in which they position their students as agents within the classroom?

To do this, I spent time in two ELA classrooms observing teacher-student and student-student interactions. I also interviewed the teachers who I observed as a way to gain insight into their experiences. Although I position myself as a researcher and observer in this context, I reject the Positivist notion of objectivity (Schön, 1983), embracing instead the social-constructivist view that knowledge is socially constructed using sign systems and within the context of culture (Heath, 1983; Tracey & Morrow, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this larger vision of social-constructivism, I also consider feminist epistemologies as foundational to understanding the ways in which knowledge circulates. According to social constructivist epistemologies, then, my observations were mediated by the linguistic and cultural tools available to me, and the dialogue generated during interviews consisted of knowledge that the interviewee and I co-constructed within the context of the interview (Vygostsky, 1978; Wertscht, 1985). Likewise, these tools, which include mental constructs or schemata, influenced the ways in which I interpreted the data (Vygotsky, 1978). The Discourses that I understand and participate in also influenced my understandings of the language that I heard and used.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

Identity, agency, and learning are complex, interrelated theoretical concepts that have been understood and described in a variety of ways. Additionally, sociocultural and historical contexts, including the context of school and the classroom, profoundly influence the formation of identity, the possibilities for agency, and the types of learning that are valued. I approach these concepts as a materialist Feminist, and a social constructivist. Looking through these lenses, I have come to believe that education should be "the practice of freedom" and our teaching should "respect and care for the souls of our students" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Our classrooms, then, should be places where students develop their capacity for thought, increase their belief in their own agency, and grow into their "ontological vocation" of being more fully human (Freire, 2014). Creating these types of spaces, however, is immensely complicated by the complex, fluid, and context-specific natures of language, identity, agency, and the classroom.

In the following theoretical framework, I examine my belief that language is a sign-system and tool that frees human beings from our immediate contexts and shapes our perceptions. I also explore my belief that identities are narrative, contextual, and constantly evolving. As a part of my examination of identity, I consider my belief that gender is a performance and a normative discourse. Finally, I reflect on my belief that schools and classrooms as socially reproduced figured worlds.

Language and People are "Positioned" within Specific Discourses

Discourses "construct actors as particular kinds of people, which enable or constrain opportunities for participation in systems of activity" (York and Kirshner, 2015, p. 106). The way that Discourses and their participants create these "particular kinds of people" is often referred to as "positioning," and "positionality refers to the fact that personal activity […] always occurs from a particular place in a social field" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 44). Unlike Discourses, which are historical but are not confined to a particular place or time, identities, positionalities, and social fields are always spatially and temporally instantiated. Therefore, the same individual might feel and act differently in different contexts. Positionality is particularly sensitive to context because it represents an individual's position relative to the situation. The way that military rank operates in context offers a clear example of how positionalities can shift. In a room of enlisted men, a captain may feel and act like a king. However, the second a general enters, his positionality changes fundamentally. His power is subordinated to the general's, and his possibilities for action in the situation are significantly restricted. In this example, the general's physical presence in the room re-positions the captain. However, we can position one another in myriad, more subtle ways. For example, as Gee (2012), Holland et al. (1998), and Johnston (2004) have asserted, we use language and narratives to position ourselves and others within Discourses and "figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). The stories that we are told and that we tell ourselves, particularly about agency and identity, come to shape our beliefs about what's possible and what we might be able to do. These beliefs then guide the types of strategies and

actions that we attempt in different contexts (Johnston, 1994). In short, our identities and positionalities influence which tools we have access to or believe that we have access to in any given situation (Holland et al., 1998).

Language is a Socially Constructed Sign-System

Language is a socially constructed sign-system that we acquire and make sense of in a variety of Discourses (Gee, 2012; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Although our sign-systems expand and develop throughout our lives, language is a part of the human experience from our very earliest days (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 2007). We are immersed in the sounds of speech in the womb, and by the age of 6-9 months, most infants know the meaning of the words used to label common objects in their environments (Bergelson & Swingley, 2012). According to Vygotsky (1978), language, no matter how limited, mediates our experiences with the world, and therefore, the moment in which our practical activities converge with speech is the most important moment in our intellectual development. He asserted that, in that moment, our relationship with our environment changes fundamentally because language allows us to experience the world and solve problems with "the help of speech, as well as [our] eyes and hands," (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 26). Additionally, as we develop, we become able to learn "through" and "about" language, which affords us additional tools for understanding the world around us (Halliday, 1982, p. 1).

Language, then, is a tool, and like any tool, it has "affordances" as well as "costs" (Wertscht, 2007, p. 186). Often, as is the case with many tools, the costs are a result of the affordances. For example, a putty knife is thin and flexible, making it ideal for skimming walls with putty. However, its very thinness makes it a terrible crowbar, and

its flexibility means it's useless as a hammer or screwdriver. Language is much the same way. It is flexible and ambiguous, which allows us to communicate new or complicated ideas, but its very flexibility and ambiguity can lead to misunderstandings. In order to understand how language functions within discourses and Discourses, such as the classroom, we need to understand the nature of language and how language functions as a mediating tool.

In the simplest of terms, a sign, which Peirce (1955) also refers to as a representamen, "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (p. 99). However, in the case of language, the sign itself has no direct connection to the thing it represents. This arbitrary nature of the relationship between a sign and the object it represents is the first of three linguistic concepts that shape the way I understand language. The second key concept is that language is social; signs are meaningless until we attribute meaning to them as a community and in the context of community (Gee, 2012; Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). The third idea that shapes my understanding of language is the notion that "the sign develops" (Wertsch, 2007, p. 186). Specifically, our understanding of signs evolves as our schemata evolve though our life experiences (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

The relationship between signs and their objects is arbitrary.

First, the connection between signs (Peircian "representamen") and their objects (Peircian "grounds") is completely arbitrary. Most adults grasp this concept, and although they may not be able to articulate it, they understand Juliet's frustrated monologue in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:

> O, be some other name!
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose

> By any other word would smell as sweet.
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
> And for that name, which is no part of thee
> Take all myself. (II, ii, 43-49)

Shakespeare makes his point as well as any linguist: a thing's name is "no part" of it. Children, however, do not always understand the arbitrary nature of the sign. For example, Vygotsky (1962) describes an experiment in which children were asked, "whether one could interchange the names of objects, for instance call a cow 'ink' and ink 'cow.'" The children denied that this interchange was possible because, for them, "an exchange of names would mean an exchange of characteristic features," (p. 129). As children develop, however, they "go through a sequence of stages culminating in the mature form of categorization and generalization" (Wertsch, 1987, p. 99). This mature form allows the individual to understand "genuine concepts" and gives them the capacity to decontextualize signs (Wertsch, 1987, p. 103). According to Vygotsky (1978), these decontextualized signs become the tools for verbal thought and problem solving.

Language is social.

However arbitrary signs may be, they do have meaning, and as Romeo and Juliet discover, the sign system of language has real power. The fact that meanings are established within the context of community means that we cannot simply "doff" signs as we please—a concept strongly reinforced by the events of the play. If Romeo were to take "some other name" for Juliet, only the two of them would be able to use that name to make meaning. Juliet could call Romeo "John" instead, but no one else would associate the name "John" with the man she loves. Instead, "John" would be a sign with no referent, and the link between the name "Romeo Montague" and the person of Romeo

would still exist in the wider community. Sociocultural contexts, then, give the link between a sign and its object link stability across individuals and the power to communicate ideas between individuals. Peirce (1955) explains the socially contingent nature of a sign this way: "it addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign" (Peirce, 1955, p. 99). If no interpretant is created, no communication has occurred, and the idea is not "caught" (Peirce, 1955, p. 99). Communication, then, requires that members of a community attribute the same or reasonably similar meanings to the signs. We come to know those meanings in the context of our social interactions with others. Sign form can be acquired before sign meaning, and therefore, mastering the form allows children to use signs socially before they are completely aware of the full sign meaning (Wertsch, 2007, p. 186). As children develop and learn from their social experiences, they gradually learn that certain sounds and gestures have meaning in their community, and in turn, they learn to attribute those same meanings to the sounds and gestures that they have heard and seen. In fact, Vygotsky (1978) posited that our first attempts at communication result when others attribute meaning to our actions. For example, he argued that an infant who appears to be pointing at something is, in fact, "unsuccessfully attempt[ing] to grasp something" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56). Initially then, what appears to be a meaningful gesture, is not intentionally imbued with meaning by the infant/sign user. However, "when the mother comes to the child's aid and realizes his movement indicates something, the situation changes fundamentally," and the gesture becomes a sign (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56).

Signs develop as schemata develop.

Vygotsky (1962) asserted and I agree that just as children develop, so too does the sign: "Word meanings are dynamic rather than static formations. They change as the child develops; they change also with the various ways in which thought functions," (p. 124). As we grow, our intellectual abilities and life experiences can have a profound impact on the way that we understand words. The way that individuals acquire new knowledge, including word meaning, can be effectively understood in terms of schema theory. In brief, schema theory posits that individuals process information by integrating it into previously existing knowledge structures. New knowledge is most easily learned when it relates to a previously existing schema, and the stronger the existent schema, the more easily an individual can integrate new information into it. Therefore, it is very difficult to learn information, again including concepts and words, to which an individual has no prior connection. According to Tracey and Morrow (2012), there are three ways by which knowledge structures can change: accretation (adding new information without changing a person's schema), tuning (adding new information which requires an adjustment of schemata), and restructuring (adding new information which requires the individual to create a completely new schema) (p.63). Vygotsky's concept of semiotic mediation further illuminates schema theory by explaining how signs make knowledge structures possible. Without signs and other culturally determined psychological tools, Vygotsky argues that we would be without the ability to generalize, categorize, or abstract (Kozulin, 1990, p. 131).

Other scholars also posit that an individual's understanding of word meaning may be partial. Beck, McKeown, and Omanson (1987) argue that word meaning should be

understood in terms of a continuum that begins with "no knowledge" of a word's meaning and ends with "rich, decontextualized knowledge of a word's meaning" (as quoted in Pythian-Sence & Wagner 2007, p. 9). Nagy and Scott (2000) asserted that the complexity of word meanings can result in partial word knowledge and suggested four key aspects of word knowledge that an individual must understand to have full knowledge: polysemy (words have multiple meanings), multidimensionality (it cannot be represented linearly), interrelatedness (words exist in relation to each other in semantic networks), and heterogeneity (different parts of speech require different types of understanding).

I agree that words are complicated and that our understandings of words are often partial, and I think that this has important implications for communication, particularly in the classroom. Wertsch (2007) asserts that sign systems are "incredibly robust in that they can allow interpretation and understanding at many different levels" and yet still facilitate communication. As discussed, children use signs before they understand them completely. Although, their usage may be situationally appropriate, we must be aware that the child may be saying "more (or perhaps less) than what [they] understand or intend" (Wertsch, 2007, p. 187). Sapir (1921) also argues that we often harness the full power of language without being aware that we are doing so: "It is somewhat as though a dynamo capable of generating enough power to run an elevator were operated almost exclusively to feed an electric doorbell" (n.p.). Therefore, we must be careful not to assume that a student using a sign understands that sign in the same way that someone with a fully realized concept of that sign would understand it.

Language is a Tool that Frees Us from the Immediate Context

One of the most significant affordances of language, particularly in the form of verbal thought, is that it frees us from the immediate context in at least three ways. First, it frees us from the flow of time. We are not trapped or limited by the present moment. Instead, we are able to access our own pasts through memory and the pasts of others through communication. Language also allows us to imagine the future or "gives us the power of envisagement: because we can name the world and thus hold it in mind, we can reflect on its meaning and imagine a changed world" (Berthoff, 1987, p. xv). We can consider possible actions and their outcomes before acting, which is vital to our ability to solve problems and to transform the world through our actions. These actions and outcomes can be simple and immediate, or they can complex and temporally distant. Likewise, the problems that language allows us to solve can be simple or complex. Second, language frees us from the immediate physical environment. When we attempt to make a plan or solve a problem, we are not limited to the tools that we can physically see or touch. We can imagine tools that exist elsewhere or that we could make using resources that are not proximally available. Thirdly, to a certain degree, language can free us from the context of our personal experiences and our limitations as individuals. It enables us to use sign systems to communicate ideas with others, learn from them, and work together. Language also allows us to imagine the motivations and intentions of others and consider the world from their perspectives.

According to Vygotsky (1978), speech, often internalized as verbal thought, plays a critical role in problem-solving. To illustrate the freedom that language gives us,

Vygotsky (1978) compared the activity of a child to Köhler's descriptions of the behavior of apes:

> The first thing that strikes the experimenter is the incomparably greater freedom of the children's operations, their greater independence from the structure of the concrete, visual situation. Children, with the aid of speech, create greater possibilities than apes […] the child is able to ignore the direct line between actor and goal. Instead, he engages in a number of preliminary acts, using […] mediated (indirect) methods. (p. 26).

He explains that children are able to use language to search their minds their minds for the most appropriate or effective tool, even if that tool is not present in their immediate environment. Additionally, children can use their psychological tools to plan how to solve the problem before they begin acting. In short, they can manipulate the situation mentally before they begin to act on it physically. This behavior, apparently absent in apes, allows children to "postpone [activity] in time" and reflect upon their own "motivation and intention" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 26).

The ability to use speech also gives children "the capacity to be both the subjects and objects of their own behavior" and to "engage in complex operations extending over time" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 26, 28). Children use "signs and words" to "talk about, compare, classify, and thus manage their own emotions" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 37). According to Vygotsky (1978), these capacities transform the nature of children's activity and allow them to regulate their own behavior in the interests of their own goals and motivations. He writes that the use of psychological tools gives the child's activities "a meaning of their own in a system of social behavior," a system which "refracts" the child's behavior "through another person" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 30). Vygotsky concludes: "this complex human structure is the product of a developmental process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history" (p. 30). When we encounter certain

forms of language, such as literature, we can also experience the perspectives of others in a very tangible, immediate sense: "when we read from an aesthetic stance, through isomorphic representation, we are in a real, neurobiological way with the characters" (Van Vaerenewyck, 2017, p. 63).

Language is a Tool that Shapes Perception

Although language frees us from the immediate context, it also shapes the way that we experience that context. As Vygotsky (1978) argued, we do not perceive the world directly. Instead, linguistic and cultural tools mediate out our experiences and perceptions. These tools allow us to select and focus on specific aspects of our environment while ignoring others. Language also adds a layer of depth to our experience of the world. Gioa (2001) explains the richness that language can add to our experiences:

> Yet the stones remain less real to those who cannot
> name them, or read the mute syllables graven in silica.
> To see a red stone is less than seeing it as jasper –
> metamorphic quartz, cousin to the flint the Kiowa
> carved as arrowheads. To name is to know and remember.

Words allow us to categorize (Vygotsky, 1978), and the knowledge that comprises these categories can increase our understanding our environment (Peirce, 1955). However, these tools may also determine what we are able to perceive and the possibilities that we are able to imagine. Wertsch (2007) offers the example of teaching students how to use graph paper as a mediating tool to allow them to meaningfully interpret data. While this tool may help students see certain patterns in the data, it might also prevent them from seeing other patterns (p. 186). Language functions similarly. For example, knowing that flint was used to make arrowheads may make it more difficult for us to see other possible

uses for it.

Orwell (1977) describes the ways in which language can constrain thought in his classic novel 1984 during a conversation between Winston and Syme. In the dystopian world of the novel, Syme's job is to rewrite the English language to serve the interests of the Party (the government). This revised version of the language is called Newspeak, and it is a dramatically simplified version of English. According to Syme, the real point of Newspeak is to get rid of words and thereby make it harder for people to commit thoughtcrime (thoughts contrary to the agenda of the Party). Syme is passionately in favor of Newspeak and explains his position to Winston: "'You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. […] Don't you see that the whole point of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end, we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible,'" (Orwell, 1977, p. 52). Without words to express their opposition, citizens will actually be unable to talk about or even theorize rebellion. However, as Syme points out, people will also be unable to express nuanced ideas or conceive of a world in which there is a difference between something that is good and something that excellent or extraordinary. While Orwell (1977) is offering an extreme example of the way that language shapes and constrains verbal thought, it is, nonetheless, instructive. Nuances in language can help us to see nuances in the world, and therefore, the more limited our lexicons are, the more limited our perceptions of the world might be.

Discourses Give Language Meaning

The same word or phrase can take on different meanings in different settings. "I'm out" means something different if the speaker is on a baseball field than it does if he is looking into an empty wallet. However, meanings also change with speaker, tone, and

a host of other factors. Power, for example, is one of the most important factors that can influence meaning. A parent saying to his/her child, "No. You're in time-out," is issuing a command and asserting control over his/her child's behavior. In contrast, if the child replied to his/her parent with the same words, "No. You're in time-out," he/she would likely be considered disrespectful and would be in even more trouble. This would be true regardless of the child's tone because of the relative positionalities of the speakers.

Gee (2012) called this type of context, the "who you are" and the "what you are doing," "big 'D'" Discourses. He included language itself in the concept of Discourse, but asserted that "Discourses ('big "D" discourses') include much more than language" (p. 2). They are "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular […] socially situated identities" (Gee, 2012, p. 3). As Gee (2012) argued, words do not have "fixed meanings" (p. 21). Instead, "meaning is primarily the result of social interactions, negotiation, contestations, and agreements between people. It is inherently variable and social" (Gee, 2012, p. 21). Discourses ("big 'D'") are vital to communication because little 'd' discourses or "language in use" are dependent upon context for meaning.

Like Gee's conceptualization of Discourse, figured worlds are "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Figured worlds can also be understood as narratives with stock characters, forces, and plot devices. Holland et al. (1998) offer the example of "the world of romance" as a way to understand figured worlds: the characters are "attractive women, boyfriends, lovers," etc., who perform a "limited

range" of acts, such as "falling in love [and] dumping." The roles that these characters play are often governed by a "specific set of forces" such as "attractiveness, love, [and] lust" (p. 52). When we enter a Discourse, then, we step into already established roles, much like an actor does when performing a play (Holland et al., 1998, p. 53).

Discourses are Socially Reproduced

At any given time, language users participate in and are constrained by multiple, overlapping discourses. As Gee (2012) wrote, "any act of speaking or writing picks up its meaning from intricate coordination of words, […] things, […] and people […] within an entire history of diverse and interacting discussions of different groups of people with different interests, sometimes conflicting, sometimes compatible" (p. 214). Although Discourses, like meaning, are fluid, some Discourses have hardened into set forms which make negotiation much more difficult. For example, Discourses surrounding gender are so entrenched that they prescribe gendered behavior, and society punishes those who act in ways that conflict with established discourses surrounding masculinity and femininity. Discourses, such as those surrounding gender, often reinforce one another in ways that maintain the status quo. For instance, D'Emilio (1997) described how the dominant Discourses surrounding the nuclear family also serve to naturalize Discourses about capitalism, sexuality, and the gendered division of labor. Figured worlds and other Discourses, are "reproduced socially" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 55). As Holland et al. (1998) asserted, "our communications with one another not only convey messages but also always make claims about who we are relative to one another" (p. 25). Some Discourses set not only the bounds of acceptable speech and behavior but also produce and reproduce the positionalities of their participants. This reproduction occurs as people

interact with one another using language shaped by ideology (Gee, 2012). For example, we often refer to little girls as "pretty," because as Pollitt (1995) pointed out, "Women's looks matter terribly in this society" (n.p.). Seemingly innocuous comments--"What a pretty dress!"—serve to reinforce Discourses surrounding gender norms and position the listener within a gendered narrative.

The reproduction of Discourses also occurs on a much larger scale. The systems that comprise a society, reproduce structures of oppression such as race, class, and gender (Bourdieu, 1979; Freire, 2014; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 2012). Although the education system has an "apparently neutral attitude," and purports to "transmit a cultural heritage which is considered as being the undivided property of the whole society," it is in fact reproduces the "distribution of cultural capital among the classes" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 57). Far from being as egalitarian as it seems, the education "reproduces the dominant ideology" of society and is a "systematization" of middle class values and norms (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 39, 38). Freire (2014) describes traditional classroom practices in which the teacher maintains absolute authority and "deposits" knowledge into the minds of the students as "banking education." He argues that this model "mytheciz[es] reality" and attempts to "conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world" (Freire, 2014, p. 83).

One of the most powerful myths surrounding education is that schools are merit-based institutions and that all those who are sufficiently gifted and diligent will be able to succeed. However, schools use the "criteria of evaluation which are the most favorable" to the "products" or children of those in power (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 59). As Bourdieu (1973) asserted, children determine their academic "aspirations by determining the extent

which they [the laws of the academic market] can be satisfied" by their resources (p. 60). He argued that "most children from the most culturally unflavored classes and sections of a class" choose not to engage academically because of their "unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 59). In contrast, children from the upper classes already have access to the cultural codes necessary for academic success, and being more likely to succeed, they are more likely to engage in the "academic market" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 57, 60). For example, verbal intelligence is highly prized within the American education system, and within the first four years of life, "an average child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words"—over 30 million more words than the average child in a family on welfare (Hart & Risley, 2003, p. 4). Schools, then, serve as sites of socioeconomic reproduction by making oppressive hierarchies appear to be meritocracies (Bourdieu, 1979; Tienken, 2013). Additionally, teachers, whether consciously or not, read the cultural identity markers of their students and give students varying affordances based on these markers (Holland et al., 1998, p. 135).

Systemic oppression also operates by restricting "access to space, to associates, to activities, and to genres" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 44). For example, only those with sufficient resources to play golf can participate in the sport and access exclusive golf courses, and access to these courses can also mean access to a network of well-resourced individuals. In turn, those who lack access are unable to learn the sign systems or develop the habitus necessary to operate in such spaces (Bourdieu, 1979; Holland et al., 1998, p. 135). Over time, this habitus or "the system of dispositions which acts a mediation between structures and practice" becomes a part of our sense of self (Bourdieu,

1979, p. 56) and serves as a marker of social status or our "positional identities" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 136). However, as Johnston (2004) pointed out, we are not always conscious of the role of habitus or Discourse in our lives: "In familiar situations, we have a deep sense of who we are that we have developed in interaction with others over an extended period. Most of the time, we are unaware of the process even as we take our assigned positions in this ongoing dance" (p. 79).

Identities Constantly Evolve and Shift

Our identities are not fixed or even singular. Delueze and Guattari (1987) argued that our identities are "multiple" and that we exist in a perpetual state of "becoming." We are always in the process of creating and recreating them within the social and cultural contexts (Holland et al., 1998). This process, however, is not completely free. We are limited by situational constraints and our understandings of our experiences. We are also constrained by Discourses of power and privilege, such as gender, race, and class. Our positionalities within these Discourses often elicit a particular type of response from others. For example, students of color are significantly more likely than whites to be labeled "at risk," expelled from school, or punished for school offences in the criminal justice system (Hirschfield, 2008). Repeatedly experiencing this type of marginalization shapes the ways in which people of color operate in the context of school because, according to Holland et al. (1998), "Persons look at the world from positions into which they are persistently cast" (p. 44). We often understand our own perspectives and positions through stories, and the stories that we tell ourselves about our experiences. One of the most important stories that we tell ourselves concerns our answer to questions of agency: do we believe that we have the power to act upon ourselves and the world?

The way that we answer this question rests on the sediment of our experiences but varies with context because our positionality or "positioning" shifts with context. Identity, then, is a complex interplay between our self-understandings, context, others' perceptions of us, and the constraints created by the Discourses and systems of power and privilege that determine access to cultural resources.

Identity is Narrative

Language and the world are fluid and constantly shifting, but as Didion (1979) asserted, the stories that we tell ourselves act as anchors that allow us to make sense of our experience:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. [...] We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (p. 11)

Language allows us to make sense of the world, but it also allows us to make sense of ourselves. The stories that we tell ourselves about who we are serve as anchors that give us a more or less stable sense of identity as we move between contexts. Additionally, the stories that we learn about ourselves within the contexts of figured worlds, such as the classroom, spread "our senses of self across many fields of activity" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). Johnston (1994) explains narrative identity this way: "When authors write novels, they create characters—people who say this sort of thing, do that sort of thing, and relate to people and things in these sorts of ways […]. This is not just what authors do, it is what people do with themselves" (Johnston, 2004, p. 23). These stories, however, are not only about who we believe we are but about who we want to be.

Holland et al. (1998) asserted, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3). These stories or "self-understandings," then, become our identities and guide our Delueze-Guattarian becomings (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3). And, "to the degree that they are conscious and objectified, permit [us], through the kinds of semiotic mediation described by Vygotsky, at least a modicum of agency" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 40). While these stories and our identities give us the sense that we have a stable, agentive "self", they are also are constantly evolving as we move through the world: "people's representations of themselves in the stream of everyday life reveal a multitude of selves that are neither bounded, stable, perduring, nor impermeable" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 29).

Identity and Agency are Performed in Context

Identity, then, is narrative, but it is also performance. We use the "cultural resources at hand" or mediating devices at hand to improvise this performance according to the constraints of context. As Garfield pointed out in his interview with Martin (2017), we are not the "sole arbiter[s]" of our own identities (n.p.). Discourses "originate outside their performers and are imposed upon people through recurrent institutional treatments and within interaction, to the point that they become self-administered. Categories carry an association to those who use them and are subject to them—an association with power" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 62). The way that we speak, act, dress, display knowledge, or express emotion "all index social categories of persons" and are "treated as indicators of claims to and identification with social categories and positions of privilege relative to those with whom we are interacting" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 127).

Discourses of power and privilege determine which cultural resources are available to us as we seek to "improvise" our identities (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5). Additionally, others can reject or accept our identity claims, and in doing so, they position us within shared Discourses. Over time, we develop perspectives and habits "that come from being treated according to broad social divisions such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 44). For example, women's overt claims to authority are often rejected, and women learn to negotiate the world without making such claims. Instead, women are more likely than men to be self-effacing and to embrace the language of suggestion, possibility, and compromise.

Holland et al. (1998) described this as phenomenon as "identity in practice" and offered the example of the "woman who climbed up the house" (p. 15). This example tells the story of Gyanumaya, a woman from the "lowest jat (caste/ethnic group)" in Nepal who was scheduled for an interview with the researchers in the home of a member of the highest jat in the community. According to the rules governing the behavior of each jat, lower jat people are unclean and therefore may not touch the food or enter the kitchens of higher level people. In this instance, however, Gyanumaya would have had to walk through the kitchen of the house to reach the balcony where the interview was to take place. This placed Gyanumaya in an untenable position: she had to reach the balcony but could not do so by walking through the house. In what Holland et al. (1998) describe as a "spectacular improvisation in the face of a problematic situation," she climbed up the side of the house onto the balcony (p. 15). In this way, she was able to "conform to the positioning that the discourse of caste had imposed upon her" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 11). Anderson and Zuiker (2010) describe another situation in which

individuals improvise and perform their identities as a way to negotiate their own roles within an established context. In their study, they perform an interactional analysis of a group of students engaging in routinized science work. In this context, one of the students developed a persona, "Scientific Shane," who took a genuine interest learning science and its procedures. When adopting this persona, Shane changed his tone and diction to one of mock seriousness. By using this persona, Shane was able to answer questions and engage in scientific discourse without compromising his established school identity, which was much more informal and less engaged.

These improvisations represent "possibilities for mediating agency" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 4). Johnston (1994) described agency as "the perception that the environment is responsive to our actions" and argues that "having a sense of agency" is "fundamental" to our "well-being" (p. 29-30). He argues that work on agency, sense of control, self-efficacy, and "attribution theory" all have "more than enough in common" to justify their conflation, namely that they all address "the stories that children use to make sense of their experience" (Johnston, 1994, p. 90). Although Johnston (1994) defines agency broadly, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provided a more structured definition of agency as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors in different structural environments […] which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (p. 970). According to their work, our "habit[s], imagination, and judgment," then, are key aspects of our identities that determine how we will chose to act in the moment and engage in "formulating projects for the future" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). In short, our sense of our own agency is a central

component of our identities that influences our decision-making processes and the ways in which we choose to engage with the world. Those engagements, in turn, comprise the performance of identity and also become "heuristics for the next moment of activity" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 40).

Gender is a performance and a normative Discourse.

According to Butler (1990), gender is not a biological fact or even a "set of free-floating attributes," and sex and gender cannot be separated in any meaningful way (p. 24). Instead, the body, including its biological sex, represents a "set of possibilities" that is "constrained by available historical conventions" (p. 521). We use these available conventions to "style" our bodies in our social context(s) and culture(s), and by doing so, we gender our bodies and identities. Gender, then, is a not an identity but a performance that gives us the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler (1988) argued that this illusion of "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 519). Although gender is a culturally created illusion, it is a powerful (and often shared) illusion that shapes cultural norms and discourses as well as the stories that we tell ourselves about where we fall in relation to those norms and discourses.

In order to begin to shatter the illusion of gender, Butler (1990) argued for a fundamentally different approach to the sex/gender system. She argued that we should deconstruct the sex/gender system by deconstructing the notion of subjectivity entirely. Her post-structural approach to gender aligns with Delueze and Guattari's (1987) description of identity as multiple and constantly evolving. Bulter (1990) asserted that

sex/gender and/or the subject are not always already extant. Instead, the subject (including the gendered subject) cannot exist outside of the boundaries of language and do not exist before the interpolation of juridical power. Therefore, gender is not a description of reality but a normative prescription intended to organize society. However, regardless of whether we see ourselves as subject, we do act as subjects in the world and do make decisions--however constrained—about how to respond to juridical power and cultural influences. These contextually influenced decisions shape our performance of gender and identity; we are, as Deleuze and Guattari would argue, constantly "becoming." For example, we are constantly making decisions about how to "style" our bodies or perform our gender and may choose to perform gender in ways that are not prescribed by the existing discourse. We can also choose to perform differently in different contexts and shift the way that we perform our identities over time.

Although gender is socially constructed, it is a salient social construct and one associated with "cross-cutting markers" (identity markers that are relevant in multiple contexts), such as appearance and behavior (Holland et al., 1998, p. 130). These markers are often "stereotypically associated with these social categories [such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity], if not actually demanded of its members" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 130). In short, people often display markers related to gender in stereotypical or normative ways because refusing to do so is risky and often results in social censure. The male/female gender binary is one of the most significant Discourses in American society and represents one of the most powerful, prescriptive norms we face as we seek to interpret and perform our identities. This binary is strongly tied to Discourses surrounding sexuality, particularly Discourses which establish and maintain

heteronormativity. People who seek to construct their identities outside of the male/female binary or who do not identify as heterosexual face myriad constraints as they seek to perform their identities. For example, in 2016, when the city of Charlotte, North Carolina created protections for its LBGTQ citizens, the state of North Carolina attempted to void those protections by passing HB-2, a controversial bill that required people to use the bathroom that corresponded with the gender marked on their birth certificates. In the flurry of coverage that surrounded the bill, individuals who performed their sex/gender in non-normative ways were often vilified or described as dangerous.

As Solnit (2017) illustrated, Discourses surrounding gender form a set of unwritten rules delineating what counts as acceptable behavior for men and women. Taking the 2016 presidential debates as her example, she asserted that men have wide latitude—"Trump roamed, loomed, glowered, snarled, and appeared to copulate with his podium" during the debates (Solnit, 2017, n.p.). In contrast, women (especially those who operate in male-dominated fields like Clinton) are hemmed in on every side—"She [Clinton] was criticized for having a voice," for showing emotion, for not showing enough emotion, for being too feminine, for being too "ambitious" (Solnit, 2017, n.p.). While male freedom is almost without limit, women are "hopelessly 'particular,' embodied, and condemned to immanence" (Butler, 1990, p. 11). Solnit (2017) makes this double-bind of femininity and the sex/gender double-standard clear: "what was accepted or disliked in them [male politicians] was an outrage in her, and whatever resentment they elicited was faint compared to the hysterical rage that confronted her" (n.p.).

Schools and Classrooms are Figured Worlds

Schools are figured worlds with set roles and conventions (Holland et al., 1998); however, they are also a site of cultural reproduction and one where teachers and students' roles and positions are influenced by their race, class, and gender (Bourdieu, 1979; Freire, 2014). As discussed, Bourdieu's (1974) work illuminates the ways in which children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds do not have the "habitus" or cultural capital to be successful in school and therefore their position in the figured world of the classroom often becomes that of the "at-risk" child. In turn, being positioned as "at-risk" limits their possible choices and diminishes their sense of agency. The potential for academic success, however, is not the only way in which students are positioned in schools. Curricular designs, adult narratives about students, allotment of resources, assessment models, and peer-to-peer interactions all serve to position students within the wider context of the school.

Within the classroom, teachers set the tone and establish norms of Discourse. According to Edelsky, Draper, and Smith (1983), teachers offer students a "'deal' presenting curricula and his or her own meanings for situations" (p. 276). As long as this deal seems "reasonable," and the teacher is consistent in his or her expectations and interpretations, children adapt to the teacher's Discourse and "do not make a counter offer" (Edelsky et al, 1983, p. 276). Teachers, then, have a great deal of control over the ways in which children make meaning in their classrooms.

Teachers are also uniquely positioned to accept or reject children's claims to identity. Because classrooms are also figured worlds, teachers are presumed to have the authority and knowledge that comes with their role. Students also have roles to play;

however, student roles are more diverse. Students, for instance, can be the teacher's pet, the smart kid, the quiet kid, the class clown, the slacker, etc. Teachers often affirm or reject students' claims to character roles based on students' identity markers. However, teachers' power to shape students' identities is stronger and more nuanced than simple acceptance or rejection of students' roles. Instead, teachers can help children imagine different identities for themselves and different possibilities for agency. According to Johnston (1994), "The way we interact with children and arrange for them to interact shows them what kinds of people we think they are and gives them opportunities to practice being those kinds of people" (p. 79). Teachers can also use narratives to position students as authors, learners, and agents, and in so doing, invite students to grow into those roles.

Conclusion

I am invested in my role as a teacher and as a parent, and I believe that helping children develop a strong sense of personal identity and agency is one of the key tasks faced by both teachers and parents alike. I also believe that language is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal as we seek to empower those around us. My beliefs relating to language and identity, then, are deeply held and influenced the ways in which I approached this study.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

I discovered *Nancy Drew* novels in 6th grade—56 novels lined up on a bottom shelf in my middle school library. I read them all in a matter of months. That fall was the beginning of my decades-long love affair with the girl detective. Nancy is often described as an attractive, titian-haired teenager driving a blue convertible, and she seemed impossibly glamorous to me. I loved how quickly she jumped to the aid of others, even strangers, and I envied her freedom and independence. More than anything, I was attracted to her belief in herself. Nancy was always confident that she could help someone, solve the mystery, or find her way out of perilous situations. I wanted to be that person, to believe in myself in that way. As I grew older, I continued to revisit those novels, and I continued to find new things to admire about Nancy. As a high school student, I loved that she was smart and confident and that she always had a regular date in the handsome Ned Nickerson. In college, I appreciated the fact that Nancy knew how to dress for every occasion and that Ned was always supporting *her,* not the reverse.

Through the years, my admiration for Nancy's sense of agency has remained constant. As an adult, my roles as teacher, researcher, and mother have made me increasingly interested in the role of agency in my life and the lives of my students. I have come to see agency as vitally important. Although agency has been defined in a variety of ways, at the most basic level, it has two parts: (1) a belief in one's abilities,

including the ability to learn and grow, and (2) a sense that one's actions matter in a given context (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Johnston, 2004). After dozens of readings of *Nancy Drew Mysteries*, I had some idea of how Nancy came to believe in herself and her ability to act strategically. Her father, Carson Drew, believed in her implicitly—he often asked her to help them think through complex problems, requested her help in situations when he could not act on his own, and gave her freedom to test her ideas. Carson Drew, as well as Nancy's other friends and family members, often asked her for advice or positioned her as a capable "sleuth." Nancy also experienced a fair amount of success; however, her successes were not uncomplicated. She often had to persist, solve problems, or re-think in order to find the solution or solve the case.

Research on agency aligns quite closely with the case of Nancy Drew. In order to develop agency, students need powerful others to believe in them and to help position them as capable actors (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Dewey, 2007; Holland, Lachoitte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Johnston, 2004). This positioning includes giving students the freedom to try and fail and try again. One of the most important ways that powerful others, including teachers, can position students for agency is through talk (Johnston, 2004; Paulson & Theado, 2014). According to Johnston (2004), "Language […] is not merely *representational* (although it is that). It is also *constitutive.* It creates and invites identities" (p. 9). The language that a teacher chooses to use with her students, then, is an identity-building tool. For example, by describing students as "authors," a teacher helps students to see "author" as a potential part of their identities (Johnston, 2004). Teachers also use language and other cues to position themselves and their students within the context of the classroom (Holland et al., 1998). As Holland et al. (1998) define it,

positionality describes a person's standing relative to others in the same context and represents the ways in which that standing defines his or her possibilities for action (p. 44). Because positionality limits the possibilities for action, it influences individuals' sense of their own agency. In short, positionality is important in a discussion of agency because a person's relative position often determines his/her sense of control.

Review Process

I began by searching for peer-reviewed articles in the combined Education Source and ERIC databases. For my first search, I left the search fields open, used a Boolean/Phrase search for *student agency*, *teacher talk,* and *gender,* and applied equivalent subjects and words as well as related words. This search returned no results. I decided to expand my search by eliminating the gender component, which yielded only five results, two of which were relevant. However, after reading those five articles, I realized that *teacher talk* has very specific connotation in the field of English language learner (ELL) education. Therefore, I eliminated the phrase *teacher talk* from the rest of my searches. These two eliminations left me with only the phrase *student agency*, a topic that I narrowed only by searching for articles published after January of 2005. This search yielded 251 results.

From this list, I used the abstracts to select articles by asking myself two questions: (1) Does this article discuss what teachers say or do to promote agency among students? And, (2) Is this article a study describing teacher practice (as opposed to an exploration of agency as a theory or conceptual framework)? The answer had to be yes to both questions for an article to receive further review, which eliminated many of the articles because they developed theories of agency but did not study agency in the

classroom. Several major trends emerged as I reviewed the abstracts, and I began to use these trends as categories that allowed me to eliminate additional articles. The first trend that I noticed was that "student agency" was frequently cited as a pedagogical goal in articles that were focused on other topics, most commonly the creation of online classroom communities or the inclusion of mobile technologies in the classroom. I eliminated these articles because they generally focused on the interactions between students and technology as opposed to the interactions between the teacher and the students. Second, nearly a quarter of the results were related to the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Many of these articles described teacher practices to increase student agency, but they were focused on strategies tailored to the needs of ESL students, such as allowing students to write in their native or home language or in a hybrid of English and another language. While these articles did include examples of teachers fostering agency, I did not include them in this review of the literature because this particular focus is not relevant to my study, which does not include an examination of the specific needs of ESL students. Third, many of the articles were ethnographies or descriptive studies that describe the impact of students' agency on their learning or futures. In these articles, the students were presumed to have agency, and the focus was not on how teachers fostered that agency. Instead, agency was described as a pre-existing, driving force that resulted in students successfully overcoming obstacles to education. I eliminated these articles as well.

The majority of the remaining articles described increased student agency as one of several desirable outcomes resulting from the use of a particular classroom tool or technique. Interestingly, many of these articles dealt specifically with increasing student

agency in STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) fields or using the arts to promote student agency. Although my focus is on the ways in which teachers position students to identify themselves as agents in the ELA classroom, I included these articles in the review because they often described more general teacher practices that were embedded in the implementation of specific programs or projects. Finally, I mined the literature reviews and reference lists of selected articles to find additional resources. Following the work of other scholars led me to more articles that met my criteria for relevancy.

Categories of Studies

Numerous studies discussed ways to foster agency and thereby increase student engagement and improve student performance. The majority of these studies described (1) specific pedagogical practices or stances that might serve to develop student agency. These included a focus on (1a) student choice and inquiry learning, (1b) students and teachers as partners in activism, and (1c) assessment as learning. The way that teachers talk to and about their students is frequently mentioned but not featured in the majority studies, although some scholars do foreground (2) teacher-student interaction and the cueing systems that educators use to foster agency, most notably, Johnston, (2004, 2012) and Edelsky, Draper, and Smith (1983). Less commonly, studies described the ways in which very specific tools, such as Photovoice (Cooper, Sorenson, & Yarborough, 2017) or graphic novels (Bernstein, 2008) can be used to increase student agency. Several other researchers examined barriers to student agency, such as lack of resources, curricular standardization, and high-stakes testing, and discussed ways to remove those barriers (Goodman & Eren, 2013; Varelas, Tucker-Raymond, & Richards, 2015). None of these

studies explored the potential interaction between gender and agency or the ways in which the gender of a student might influence the ways in which teachers position him or her in the classroom.

Pedagogical Stances and Practices that Foster Student Agency

A teacher's beliefs and practices strongly influence the environment and atmosphere of his/her classroom (Edelsky et al., 1983; Johnston, 2004, 2012; Paulson & Theado, 2014). A teacher's words, rules, routines, assignment, and assessments all send messages to his/her students about what he/she expects from them; however, all of these pedagogical choices also position students in the classroom and send messages to students about what kind of people the teacher thinks they are. Whether or not teachers consciously do so, they are always communicating possibilities for student agency. According to the following studies, teachers who intentionally position their students as agents in the classroom can do so in a variety of ways. The first way that teachers can position their students as agents is to emphasize student choice in the classroom or practice some form of inquiry learning. Secondly, teachers can cultivate agency in their students by positioning them as activists. Often, this type of teaching is linked to the practice of critical pedagogy. According to Nieto (2010), "Critical pedagogy is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world" (p. 103). It is a "stance" which allows teachers and students to work together to "alter patterns of domination and oppression" within schools and society (Nieto, 2010, p. 104). Additionally, the successful practice of critical pedagogy requires teachers to position themselves as co-learners or co-researchers in the classroom. By working and learning alongside their students, teachers send the message that they see

their students as capable learners and worthy partners. Thirdly, teachers can foster student agency in their classrooms by reframing their assessment practices. They de-emphasize the traditional, evaluative focus of assessment that puts teachers in the position of evaluator and students in the position of being judged—a fundamentally unequal footing. Instead, these teachers underscore the idea that assessment is about learning. These three approaches often co-exist in classrooms of effective teachers; however, I have organized the articles below based on which pedagogical aspect each emphasizes.

Student choice and inquiry learning.

Although student choice and inquiry learning are distinct approaches, they are both underpinned by the idea that students should have some control over their learning. Student choice is exactly what it sounds like: students get to choose what or how to learn, usually from a range of possibilities developed by the teacher. For example, in a student-choice classroom, students may have the opportunity to choose which text they would like to read from a list or how they would like to show their learning while meeting criteria described by a rubric. Inquiry learning is more open-ended, and according to Harvey & Daniels (2009), it is defined by three elements. First, in inquiry-focused classroom, teachers frame "school study around questions developed and shaped by kids" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 56). Second, teachers "hand the brainwork of learning back to the kids" so that the "kids have to take responsibility for the things that real learners do" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.57). "Real learners" decide on their focus of study, determine what's valuable to them, do high-quality research, and monitor their own learning. Finally, inquiry learning requires a "focus on the development of kids' thinking

first, foremost, and always" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 57). According to Harvey and Daniels (2009), "the ultimate manifestation of thinking […] is being somehow changed and *doing something* as a result" (p. 57). Student choice and/or inquiry learning generally foster student agency by giving students more power in the classroom, affording them opportunities to exercise their agency, and providing them with a space to experience the outcomes of their choices.

Karahan and Roehrig's (2016) qualitative case study defined agency as "purposeful actions taken by a student in their own interest (Pruyn, 1999) or the power of the individual to choose what happens next (Podolefsky, Rehn, & Perkins, 2013)" (p. 427). Acting as participant researchers, Karahan and Roehrig (2016) conducted "classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and [had] informal conversations with the participant teachers and students in the classroom environment" (p. 428). The class they studied was a secondary level, elective environmental science class that was co-taught by a science and a social studies teacher. In this project-based classroom, "students were free to decide what they wanted to learn, the way they wanted to learn, the experts whom they wanted to contact, and the media they chose to use presenting their work," (Karahan & Roehrig, 2016, p. 432). The boundaries set by the teachers were simple. First, students had to focus on an issue related to the Minnesota River Basin. Second, they had to complete a service-learning project related to their chosen issue. Karahan and Roehrig (2016) found that this pedagogical approach had several advantages in terms of increasing students' agency:

> One of the advantages of agency we frequently heard several times in our conversations was the fact that students were motivated to work hard with no complaints because they were working on the projects that they felt passionate about and that had importance for both their communities and themselves.

> Learning about the content they really cared about and using this knowledge to create solutions for the environmental problems their communities experience increased their motivation, as well as, their feeling of accomplishment at the end. (p. 434)

When asked to describe their experiences, none of the students mentioned grades. Instead, they focused on what they had accomplished. They left the class feeling empowered as actors both within the classroom and within the larger community.

Rogat, Witham, and Chinn (2014) also described a classroom in which the teacher supported student agency by giving students "a broad range of forms of autonomy" (p. 1). They conducted their observations in four seventh-grade science classrooms housed in two, very different middle schools. Rogat et al. (2014) argued that most science classrooms and laboratory-based classes significantly limit student choice as well as student autonomy. Their definition of autonomy aligns closely to the concept of student agency: "Autonomy is conceptualized as experiencing one's actions as originating from within and as self-endorsed (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy is also experienced when students' interests, values, and goals are aligned with their behavior, because they endorse the significance of these behaviors as relevant to their own internal goals (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004)" (Rogat et al., 2014, p. 2). In this qualitative study, researchers began their coding of classroom observations using "five autonomy-support dimensions": (1) *organizational and procedural autonomy support*, which included giving students choice about order of activities or task format; (2) *rationale and relevance*, which referred to times that the teacher explained the importance of an activity or tried to connect an idea/activity to students' lives outside of the classroom; (3) *responsiveness,* which described the teacher's comportment when listening and responding to students; (4) *feedback*, which researchers constrained to positive feedback given in response to

student-initiated ideas; and (5) *cognitive autonomy support,* which described teacher practices in relation to engaging students at the curricular level (Rogat et al., 2014, p. 13-14). After engaging with the data, Rogat et al. (2014) found it necessary to introduce three addition dimensions: (1) *encouraging self-regulated learning,* which described instances when the teacher required students to create their own criteria and standards for successful learning, (2) *peer responsiveness,* which entailed teachers encouraging students to listen and respond carefully to one another, and (3) *peer accountability,* which was used to code messages "conveyed that monitoring each other's use of criteria and reasoning was a shared responsibility, and that the teacher was not the only one with a final word/evaluation" (Rogat et al., 2014, p. 31). Rogat et al. (2014) asserted that their major contribution lies in the numerous specific examples of classroom interaction and lesson plans that concretely illustrate how teachers can support student autonomy in their classrooms. No student data was collected as a part of this study.

Jennings and Mills (2009) conducted a five-year ethnographic study at an inquiry-focused elementary school. They collected two data sets, one that captured a synchronic picture of six classrooms and another that offered a diachronic description of one cohort as it evolved over a five-year period. They focused on the idea that inquiry learning is constructed as teachers and students interact within the larger discourse of the classroom and school and described how that "discourse afforded particular opportunities for learning, acting and being" (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1587). Jennings and Mills (2009) described, mappped, created vignettes of, and coded several class discussions that occurred when students were studying "living and nonliving things" (p. 1588). They assert that discourse inquiry learning is comprised of six key practices and offer detailed

classroom examples of each of the following practices: (1) *dynamic and dialogic,* (2) *attentive, probing, thoughtful* conversation, (3) *agentive and socially responsible,* (4) *relational and compassionate,* (5) *reflective and reflexive,* and (6) *values multiple and multidisciplinary perspectives* (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1592-1606). Jennings and Mills (2009) argued that inquiry learning positions children as agents in at least two ways. First, children are "agents who have a right and responsibility to contribute to the development and maintenance of their class communities" (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1596). Students frequently "created and negotiated rules, rituals, structures, boundaries, [… and] curriculum" (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1596). Secondly, inquiry learning gives children the opportunity to act "strategically" to accomplish "individual and community goals" (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1596). Jennings and Mills (2009) concluded that inquiry learning is complex, multi-faceted, and difficult to categorize, but that the "power of classroom talk to shape possibilities or limit them" is clear (p. 1596). They asserted that, within the context of inquiry, teachers should focus on using classroom discourse to "develop practices that support students as active agents" who are "responsible for developing themselves as more thoughtful, caring, and intelligent people who delight in learning and are committed to creating a more compassionate, equitable, knowledgeable, and democratic world" (Jennings & Mills, 2009, p. 1613).

Karahan and Roehrig's (2016), Rogat et al. (2014), and Jennings and Mills (2009) all describe inquiry-based classrooms that meet the criteria established by Harvey & Daniels (2009) in relatively similar ways. Fels (2008), however, examined a variation on the theme of inquiry that she calls "performative inquiry." She described performative inquiry as "a research methodology that uses the arts as a process or medium of research"

(Fels, 2008, p. 9). In the classroom, performative inquiry allows students to "embody" their learning through various forms of "role drama" such as "visualizations, tableaux, soundscapes, and improvisation" (p. 13). She worked with secondary level English students and partnered with a science teacher to study the ways in which performative inquiry enhances student learning. Fels (2008) asserted that this practice forced teachers to "let go" and allow students to take charge of the "moment" in the classroom when learning occurs (p. 13). This model of inquiry positions students as active interpreters of the curriculum and fosters student agency by "invit[ing] our students to engage, not as students, but as fellow explorers in an as-yet not known curricular landscape of inquiry" (Fels, 2008, p. 16).

Students and teachers as partners in activism.

According to Nieto (2010), "Critical pedagogy is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world" (p. 103). Based on the work of Freire (2014), critical pedagogy is also defined by its insistence on "using students' present reality as a foundation for further learning, rather than doing away with or belittling what they know and who they are" (Nieto, 2010, p. 104). As a result, teachers invite different perspectives into their classrooms and empower students to challenge "patterns of domination" (Nieto, 2010, p. 105). Nieto (2010) emphasizes that this empowerment is both individual and social and that it often improves student achievement. Her approach is consistent also with Freire's (2014) conceptualization of "problem-posing" education, which he defines in opposition to "banking education." Unlike the inquiry-based pedagogies described above, banking education positions students as "information poor" and presents them with "bodies-of-knowledge" to be

"eaten in gulps" (Shor, 1987, p. 21). This positioning, however, assumes that students are "objects" rather than "subjects" and therefore does little foster student agency (Freire, 2014). Critical pedagogy resists this paradigm by fostering critical awareness and consciousness-building dialogue. It positions students as subjects capable of "reading" and understanding the world and then acting on those understandings to make the world a more socially just place (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7).

Numerous scholars in addition to Freire (2014), Freire and Macedo (1987), Nieto (2010), and Shor (1987) have discussed the importance of positioning students as subjects and learning through activism, including Cowhey (2006), whose book described ways of "teaching differently in the primary grades." In her rich, engaging prose, she recreated the atmosphere of her classroom, complete with vignettes of student speech and activity. Cowhey's (2006) text portrayed her experiences with her second grade class as she sought to teach them to consider the world critically (in the Freirian sense) and from the perspective of others. She described students completing various social action projects born out of their wonderings and inquiries and offered the details of her lesson plans at the end of the book. By emphasizing understanding, compassion, and action in her classroom, she was able to position her students as subjects capable of making the world around them a better place.

In her participatory action research project, McIntyre (2006) worked with minority, inner-city middle school students to increase their personal and collective agency. She defined agency as the "active, ongoing participation of inner-city public school students in the development and implementation of teaching-learning experiences" and argued that giving students opportunities to explore agency is a moral

imperative for educators (McIntyre, 2006, p. 630). McIntyre (2006) asserted that "in order for those opportunities to be more than blind attempts at alternative approaches […], I need to link them to a way of thinking about education and research that positions the students as active agents of constructive change" (p. 436). Because of this belief, she developed a project focused on developing individual and collective agency by empowering 12 middle school students (mixed genders, primarily minority students of low socioeconomic status) to act in concrete ways to change their realities. 15 graduate students (mixed genders, primarily white, upper-middle class) also participated in the project as part of their coursework at the university. Over the course of three years, students and researchers met together weekly to identify problems in the community and take action. These thinking, talking, and listening sessions generated a variety of products for analysis, including photo books. They also led to students spearheading a neighborhood cleanup project. According to McIntyre (2006), "By taking actions that contributed to community well-being, the participants gained a new confidence in themselves as thinkers and doers" (p. 642). University students also benefited from the experience because they gained a new understanding of systems of oppression and were able to develop meaningful relationships with people they might not otherwise have met.

York and Kirshner (2015) also constructed their research project as a partnership between the university and the local school system. They developed and the framework of Critical Civic Inquiry (CCI) over the course of three years and gathered data from two case-study schools. Critical Civic Inquiry is designed to guide students through "an action research cycle that integrates student voice and academic content" and is considered a form of "action civics" because it engages "marginalized youth" in

"vocal[izing] and interrogat[ing] their lived experiences of poverty, racism, or stratified schooling" (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 104). The first partner school that implemented the CCI framework was Smith High School, which is located in "a large, economically struggling suburb of Denver," and is characterized by low academic performance and problems with criminal activity (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 108). CCI was implemented in the classroom of a veteran teacher as a part of a law and government course. Smith students chose to focus on the issue of low-quality lunches at their school. The second school, Central School is a middle school located in "an urban industrial section of Denver," an economically disadvantaged neighborhood (p. 109). In this school, a second year Teach for America fellow implemented CCI as a part of her ELA curriculum, and students chose to focus on the issue of bullying, which they believed had become a problem. York & Kirshner (2015) asserted that both school and classroom environments positioned students for agency and determined the ways in which students participated in CCI. At the school level, "positioning emerges from narratives about what it means to be a student in a particular school and reflects both the ways in which adults talk about students" and the "material constraints" of the school (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 106). At the classroom level, positioning "can include talk about students in that space, as well as classroom activities and the roles that are made accessible to students in the process of instruction" (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 106).

York & Kirshner (2015) analyzed videos, field notes, student interviews, student work, student-guided tours of the school, and informal conversations with teachers (p. 108). During their analysis, they focused closely on "the ways in which adults were positioning students through dialogue and action because of the power differential that

shapes adult-youth relations in school" (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 108). At Smith High School, York & Kirshner (2015) found that adults at the school-level tended to position students as "incompetent" and that the school culture was characterized by negative talk and lack of interest in students (p. 110). At the classroom-level, the teacher described students as capable but also expressed "skepticism" about their abilities. Therefore, she limited their possibilities for action "based on her perception of students' chance of achieving a tangible outcome" (York & Kirshner, 2015). She attempted to act on their behalf within the context of the school, but "made it clear" to students that decisions would be "out of the hands of the students" (p. 112). The ways that the teacher and other adults in the school positioned students "undermined" rather than fostered their sense of individual and collective agency. In contrast, the adults at Central Middle School positioned students as "change agents"—capable, contributing members of the school community with access to the decision-making apparatus of the school (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 114). Within the classroom, the teacher referred to students as "researchers" and regularly engaged them in evaluating their own work and the work of their peers (York & Kirshner, 2015, p. 114). York and Kirshner (2015) observed that the students at Central experienced more success within their school climate than the students at Smith and consequently felt more empowered as agents than their counterparts.

Gutstein's (2007) work with his middle school math students exemplifies critical pedagogy in action and emphasizes the ways in which a focus on critical pedagogy empowers students. Working as a practitioner-researcher, Gutstein (2007) taught and observed seventh and eighth-grade math students at a public school in Chicago. Most of his students were Latinx and lived in a *barrio* near downtown Chicago. Many students

who lived in the *barrio* rarely left the neighborhood, and Gutstein (2007) suspected that they might not even realize how close they lived to the expensive skyscrapers downtown. He decided to use math to help them "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987): "Students read about the plan in a newspaper article and located the park on a map. They then computed how long it would take to drive from the park to the Sears Tower in downtown Chicago, at 25 mph, with no red lights" (Gutstein, 2007, p. 428). This activity was mathematically challenging because students had to use maps with two different scales and choose the correct formulas to calculate the drive time. It also served to build critical consciousness because it helped Gutstein (2007) to teach students that the proximity (about a five minute drive) of their park to the Tower made it desirable to developers.

Gutstein (2007) followed up this activity later in the year by reading another newspaper article with his students, one that predicted that development and gentrification would destroy the *barrio*. In particular, the article discussed plans to replace their neighborhood park with a parking lot for downtown businesses and to build a development, which included "affordable" housing, in their neighborhood. Gutstein (2007) worked with his students to use math to dig into the details of the project—what, for example, did "affordable" mean? After researching the numbers proposed by the developers and comparing them to the median income of *barrio* residents, students realized that very few "Rivera families could afford even the cheapest new houses" and that "affordable" was a term that did not apply to them (Gutstein, 2007, p. 440).

Math helped students to understand the real-life consequences of the development proposal, and once aware of the threat that gentrification and development posed to their

community, they wanted to take action. As a class, they attended City Hall hearings and talked to members of their community to raise awareness. Gutstein (2007) concluded that students gained agency through this process because they were able to compare their former knowledge to their new awareness of their world: "They began to appreciate their own capacity to deconstruct representations, using mathematics, and thus further developed their own conceptions of reality, knowledge, power, and politics. Doing so can create in students the belief that they can effect change" (p. 436). His students agreed with this description of their empowerment. When reflecting their math experiences in Gutstein's class, one student, Freida, wrote: "now I realize that you could use math to defend your rights and realize the injustices around you […] It's sort of like a pass you could use to try to make the world a better place" (Gutstein, 2007, p. 420).

Assessment for Learning (AfL) or Assessment as Learning (AaL).

Crossouard (2009) used data collected by the Jersey educational authority in the United Kingdom to explores the connections between two professional development initiatives, assessment for learning (AfL) and critical skills thinking (CST), and student engagement and agency. She considered the data using the framework provided by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which posits that "communities have tensions at their heart" and that mediating tools allow us to understand our "social worlds" and active agentively (Crossouard, 2009, p. 79). Within the context of this study, AfL is defined as roughly equivalent to formative assessment, or assessment designed to give teachers and students information about the learning process, and CST is described as an initiative designed to help students cope with "changing global contexts" (Crossouard, 2009, p. 82). CST emphasizes "challenges" or "experiential, problem-

solving tasks" that are "tackled by groups of learners" with little teacher intervention with the goal of increasing students' abilities to think and work collaboratively (Crossouard, 2009, p. 82).

Crossouard (2009) found that AfL tasks were often structured as learning challenges and that the overlap of the two approaches served to increase student agency. Specifically, she found that the structure of a CST challenge "allocates group work responsibilities" and repositions students as subjects with "specific, wider responsibilities to be fulfilled within their task group" (Crossouard, 2009, p. 85). She contrasted these working identities with the traditional student identity of "learner" that positions students as "vulnerable" and is "constructed primarily in relation to a teacher's authoritative position" (Crossouard, 2009, p. 85). These new, less vulnerable identities allowed more "space for student agency and a wider range of meaning-making" (Crossouard, 2009, p. 85). Additionally, this arrangement allowed students to share some of the "labour" of learning that is traditionally undertaken by teachers. Crossouard (2009) concluded that considering AfL and CST through the lens of an activity system provides teachers with a useful way to conceptualize and shape possibilities for student learning and agency.

Fletcher (2016) also examined the role of formative assessment in the cultivation of student agency. According to Fletcher (2016), "students' ability to self-regulate learning […] entails learners activating and sustaining thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are systematically oriented towards the attainment of personal goals" (p. 401). Self-regulation of learning, then, requires students to act agentively and to actively engage in the learning process. Fletcher (2016) asserted that the goal of her practitioner research here was to work toward filling a gap in the literature about the process of positioning

students as agents in the learning process. Specifically, she focused on the way that a formative learning process, or a process in which assessment is viewed as "embedded as part of the learning process" and is "explicitly aimed at informing learners and teachers of specific gaps in a learner's understanding and skills" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 401). Fletcher (2016) implemented Assessment as Learning (AaL) by using the three phases of self-regulated learning: *"forethought, performance,* and *self-reflection"* (p. 402). Student learning templates scaffolded the forethought phrase in detail. This first section included "overall success criteria" related to desired learning outcomes and "suggested strategies" for self-regulating and self-pacing throughout the process (Fletcher, 2016, p. 404). Additionally, students were required to choose their own audience and writing genre. Teachers encouraged students to revisit these templates as they created their texts.

Fletcher's (2016) sample consisted of 126 students ranging from 7 to 11 years of age and 7 teachers at an independent primary school in northern Australia. She collected a wide range of data including students' planning templates, which were designed as a part of the assessment process, as well as student writing samples, student interviews, teacher interviews, and email correspondence with teachers. Then, Fletcher (2016) inductively coded her data by allowing codes, patterns, and themes to emerge. She organized these themes into three main themes: "individual/intrapersonal factors," "social factors," and "practices" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 405). Of these three themes, the first included the thematic categories of "self/autonomy: preferences & choices" and "self-efficacy" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 405). Fletcher (2016) concluded that "students self-efficacy and perception of control in the assessment process were facilitated because the AaL process required them to make individual choices in regard of how to demonstrate

learning" (p. 412). Additionally, she found that the practice of allowing students' interests to "driv[e] their task choices" supported a sense of agency and engagement because it gave them the sense that they were contributing to the learning process in real and meaningful ways (Fletcher, 2016, p. 412). Finally, Fletcher (2016) asserted that students' sense of control over the assessment process freed them to exceed their own and their teachers' expectations for them.

Teacher-Student Interaction and Cueing Systems that Promote Student Agency

Johnston (2012) wrote, "As teachers, we choose our words and, in the process, construct the classroom worlds for our students and ourselves," worlds with "opportunities and constraints" (p. 1). Within the world of the classroom, students are frequently and powerfully positioned by teacher language. The ways in which we address, praise, criticize, guide, and question students all have implications for the development of student agency. The ways in which we talk about texts and the world also send messages to students about their roles and capabilities. As Paulson and Theado (2014) argued, "there is a link between what is said or done and what is thought" (p. 4). Additionally, language is not the only way that we communicate with or position students. Our classroom norms related to behavior and use of space and time, as well as the cuing systems that we use to communicate and maintain those norms, serve to position students and have repercussions in terms of student agency.

Johnston's (2004, 2012) work on the use of language as a way to empower students and teach them to act strategically is seminal in the study of student agency. He provided numerous examples of phrases that can be used to increase student agency and explored the reasons that these phrases can shape student identities. For example,

Johnston (2004) wrote that the question, "How are you planning to go about this?" positions students as planners and thus as agents capable of creating and enacting a plan (p. 33). Another powerful example of student positioning uses the question, "How did you figure that out?" to encourage students to generate narratives in which they are strategic problem-solvers (Johnston, 2004, p. 31).

Johnston's (2012) work also explored the ways in which educators can encourage students to view themselves as capable of transforming their own identities and capabilities by using phrases and practices that emphasize possibilities for growth and change. Like Kohn (1999) and Dweck (2015), he posited that teachers should focus on student identity as always evolving or becoming. Instead of praising students for being "smart," which implies that "smartness" is a fixed characteristic, teachers should focus on making "causal process statements" (Johnston, 2012, p. 42). Similarly, Johnston (2012) and Kohn (1999) argued against the use of praise in the classroom because praise implies that "judging" is a part of the classroom dynamic and positions teachers as having the power to praise *or* criticize. Instead, he suggested noticing students' positive behavior, such as acting strategically or putting forth effort. In line with much of the scholarship discussed here, Johnston's (2012) comprehensive work also focused on the importance of inquiry and civic engagement as tools for promoting student agency. Additionally, his belief in the power of teacher's language to promote agency in the classroom is supported by the studies discussed below.

According to Paulson and Theado (2014), "examining instructor language use is vital" to understanding how teachers position agency in the classroom (p. 2). Specifically, they focused on metaphors related to agency that one college English

professor of 20 years used in his classroom when talking to a group of 14 first-year college students. They videotaped three 75-minute classes, interviewed the instructor, and conducted a written follow-up from the instructor. Then, researchers conducted an analysis of "metaphorical linguistic expressions" and their underlying conceptual metaphors. They found that he used metaphors characterizing "reading as understanding," "knowledge as constructed," and "knowledge as a tool" (Paulson & Theado, 2014, p. 7). Additionally, he characterized text as *agent, tool,* and *speech,* and language as *agent* and *tool* (Paulson & Theado, 2014, p. 7). By examining the implications of these metaphors, particularly those related to text, Paulson and Theado (2014) found that the professor was sending his students "competing" messages about the location of agency in the classroom. Referring to the text as a tool positioned students as agents who can use the text. However, describing the text in ways that imbued it with agency simultaneously upheld the power of the text and took power away from the students by implying that "words have control over meaning and can themselves effect change" (Paulson & Theado, 2014, p. 14). Pauslon and Theado (2014) concluded that the conceptual metaphors that instructors use in the classroom "can frame instruction differently, shaping both the nature of the concepts being discussed and the message being delivered," (p. 17). These metaphors can also "shape students' experience of their learning differently and, as a result, can influence developing percepts of themselves as agents of their literacy and as active participants in the educational process" (Paulson & Theado, 2014, p. 17).

Edelsky et al. (1983) conducted a case study in the classroom of a six-grade teacher, Karen Smith (KS), in an inner-city school in Phoenix, Arizona. Of the 25

students in KS's class, 85% identified as Mexican-American or Black, and over 80% were eligible for free breakfast and lunch (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 260). According to Edelsky et al. (1983), they selected KS's classroom for their case study because she was a tremendously effective teacher who engaged students and fostered their agency in spite of the fact that she did not do most of the things that research has identified as effective teaching practice. They began their research with the question: "How does this teacher get children to meet her unusual expectations?" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 261). They used videotapes and field notes to gather data as participant-observers over the course of five weeks. For the first two weeks, researchers observed student interaction "all day every day" and then scaled back to three days a week for the remainder of the study. They also interviewed students and KS and conducted follow-up observations in December and January to "verify" that the same types of interaction were still occurring (Edelsky et al., 1983 p. 261).

Researchers examined the data and categorized classroom activities as accomplishing one or more of eight possible goals that they had identified through their observations and conversations with KS. These eight goals were then subdivided into "rules, roles, cues, and values," and while the data was not as tidy as Edelsky et al. (1983) had hoped, it did reveal several important ways in which KS promoted student agency within her classroom. KS's values emphasized respect, the goodness of humanity, the importance of independence as well as interdependence, and posited that work should be enjoyable and purposeful as well as original (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 265). These values served as the thread that connected her rules, roles, and cues. KS operated using several implicit rules, among them "Use Your Head," "Do What's Effective," and "No Cop-

Outs" emphasized students' ability to think for themselves and to take responsibility for their own actions (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 265). Edelsky et al.,(1983) observed that KS "did not punish the students, nor did she relax her requirements; she just kept demanding, expecting" (p. 266). These demands persisted when students faced challenges and, knowing that KS would not assist them, spurred them to act as problem-solvers. KS also adopted a variety of roles within the context of her classroom, including "information dispenser," "scout leader," "consultant/coach," "neutral recorder," and "preacher" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 268). Each of these roles was characterized by different cycles of initiation, control, focus, and teacher activity. These roles also served to remind students of their relationships with KS and gave the students increased and frequent control over their interactions with her.

Edelsky et al. (1983) also identified eight different "cuing devices" that KS used to demonstrate her expectations. Researches labeled the most salient of these cues (in terms of fostering student agency) as "Behaving As If the desired were actual" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 270). These cues often demonstrated that KS believed that her students were "competent, sensible, and well-intentioned," and by "Behaving As If" they were, she helped students share those beliefs about themselves and their classmates. Props were an essential part of "Behaving As If" and were used from the first day onward as "concrete symbols of KS's belief in children's competence and good intentions" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 271). For example, she gave students cameras, clipboards, and folders to demonstrate to students that "the responsibility was really theirs […] this was the real thing" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 272). "Minimal Guidance" was also another cue that served to cultivate student agency in the classroom. KS often gave "minimal" directions

after an activity had begun. However, these directions were effective because students were "carry[ing] out their own rather than the teacher's task" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 272). Minimal directions served to remind students that they were capable of figuring out how to enact their plans and that KS trusted them to do so. Finally, KS fostered student agency through the cue of "Structuring of the Environment and Curriculum" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 272). This cue meant that students worked on tasks that were "important and worth accomplishing" so that their successes were meaningful to them.

Edelsky et al. (1983) concluded that KS offered students "purposeful assignments and genuine literacy activity" in a way that positioned them as agents in the classroom and the learning process (p. 276). She also "proffered relationships," based not on the traditional teacher-student power dynamic, but on "respect and interdependence" (Edelsky et al., 1983, p. 276). When students accepted these offers, they learned to see themselves as subjects or agents capable of acting strategically and in meaningful ways. They also learned to see themselves as part of a larger community and as people with responsibilities to their community, which in turn encouraged them to view themselves as agentive subjects.

Conclusion

At present, the literature related to fostering student agency in the classroom is most often tied to concepts of inquiry learning and critical literacy or critical pedagogy. Though small in number, studies examining student agency include a wide range of participants and contexts from around the world. Studies use a variety of methods to examine agency from primary school through the university level in a variety of countries including Australia, the United States, Turkey, and the United Kingdom While some

current research does exist that describes the way that teachers promote agency in their classrooms, this literature most often focuses on what teachers say and do in exceptional or exemplary cases and makes no mention of any gender disparities.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study is to better understand how teachers position students for agency. The secondary purpose of this study is to help the teacher participants reflect on their classroom practices and beliefs about education because, as Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) assert, examining teacher talk allows teachers to "examine and critique" their assumptions and practices (p. 74). These goals guided my participant selection, data collection, and analysis. I structured my research as a descriptive multiple-case study in which I observed two teachers in their classrooms (Yin, 2009). Although descriptive case studies have much in common with ethnography, case studies begin with theory, in this instance, the theoretical assumption that teachers can and do position students as agents (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) posits that case studies are defined first, by scope and, second, by data collection and analysis strategies (p. 18). First, case studies are appropriate when the scope of the study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). I examined the phenomenon of teacher discourses, which must necessarily be studied within the context of the classroom. I chose to focus on the teacher as the unit of analysis in order to get a coherent picture of what teachers do in the classroom.

Second, case studies "cope with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points," rely on the triangulation of

data, and "benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). In this case, the discrete event comprising each data point was a teacher-student or teacher-class interaction during which the teacher positions students for agency. However, for each of these instances, there were numerous variables of interest including the teacher's words, tone, proxemics, kinesis and the student's race, class, gender, and academic performance level. Additionally, the immediate context of the conversation was a variable of interest. For example, was the teacher giving an assignment, offering students choices, facilitating group work, etc.? In order to triangulate my data, I relied on multiple sources of data (see below). Finally, I began this study with certain propositions that arose from my life experiences as well as from theory.

Research Context

For the past four years, I have served as a supervisor for interns completing their student teaching internship at the middle and high school levels. As a part of this work, I have had the privilege of observing in well over 50 classrooms in multiple schools. While each of these classrooms was unique and interesting in its own way, I became particularly interested in the interactions between teachers and students in the single-gender classrooms at Green Middle School. Several of the teachers that I observed mentioned that they tried to include more activities that allowed for movement in their male-only classes than in their female-only classes. These conversations, coupled with my prior research on gender socialization, made me reflect on how these differences in teaching practices might contribute to different habits and attitudes between students. These conversations also called to mind prior conversations that I have had with my

colleagues about the modifications and adaptations that they made to their teaching based on the academic level of the class, i.e., college prep, honors, or Advanced Placement. Unfortunately, research suggests that these academic tracks are equally or more likely to be determined by a student's race or socioeconomic status than by his or her ability. And, since the tests are often biased in favor of white, middle-class students, "tracks tend to be rather homogenous with respect to race, ethnicity, and social class" with the lower tracks comprised primarily of poor minority students (Mickelson, 2001, p. 222).

As a person committed to social justice and equitable pedagogical practices, I began to wonder how differences in teaching practices—particularly those prompted by the teacher's perception of student needs or abilities—might influence students. As I considered this question, I began to make connections to my own experiences as a student. Thinking back, I had little awareness of how my teachers were engaging differently with different groups of students or different classes. As a teacher, however, I take a moment to pause after each class and reflect on the ways in which I have treated my students that day. In many ways, the question of teacher influence is unanswerable. For example, teacher practices are just one of many possible influences on a student's development, and teacher practices might influence one aspect of a student's identity more strongly than others. Additionally, enacting equitable teaching practices does not necessarily mean treating all students in the same way. Finally, teachers' perceptions or beliefs might not be clearly reflected in their pedagogical choices. The influence of teacher practices on students, then, would be incredibly difficult to measure or observe. Student surveys might begin to scratch the surface, but they would yield limited data. On the other hand, focusing on the details of teacher-student communication in the classroom

could reveal much more about "*how* specific attitudes or beliefs get into […students'] heads" (Glesne, 2016, p. 186).

Precisely because influence cannot be accurately isolated for study, I designed this study to focus on the observable and self-reported ways in which teachers position students as agents in their classrooms. While nearly any school would afford the opportunity to observe classes at different academic levels, I chose to conduct my research at Shining Scholars Academy, Green MS because single-gender classrooms allowed to me observe classrooms grouped by the variable of gender. Green MS is one of seven middle schools in Venetia County School District, a large district that serves over 27,000 students in the city of Columbia, SC (Richland School District Two Homepage, 2017). Venetia is also the largest middle school in the district, serving over 1,200 diverse students and housing three magnet programs ("About Our School," 2017). The school does not release specific information concerning the demographics of the student body.

One of these magnet programs, Shining Scholars Academy, offers single-gender education. According to their mission statement, Shining Scholars Academy is "a magnet program that focuses on the needs of the whole child and reduces the typical middle school adolescent pressures within a single gender environment" (TWO Academies, 2017). Venetia Middle School consists of a group of four buildings that range in age, clustered around a large green quad. Students often congregate in this space during breaks and between classes. Shining Scholars Academy is housed in the oldest building, on the side of the quad farthest from the entrance. It is a relatively small program, with approximately 300 students.

Research Questions

I designed this study to answer the following questions:

1) How do English Language Arts teachers use language and other cues to position middle-level students as agents within the context of the single-gender classroom?

2) How, if at all, do teacher practices and teacher language vary based on the student or group of students with whom they are interacting?

Additionally, I have intentionally designed interview questions to gather data that will answer the following question, which is beyond the scope of the present study but may be the subject of future analysis:

What is the relationship between middle-level English Language Arts teachers expectations and goals for their students and the ways in which they position their students as agents within the classroom?

Propositions

My research questions make several assumptions clear. By asking *how* English Language Arts teachers use language and other cues to position middle-level students as agents within the context of the single-gender classroom, I made the assumption that teachers can and do position their students as agents. The work of numerous researchers establishes that the speech of influential adults can shape the way that children perceive themselves (Dweck, 2016; Johnston, 2004, 2014; Kohn, 1999). Although this research establishes that teachers *can* influence students, it does not establish how they do. However, public school teachers in South Carolina are held accountable for their teaching using the South Carolina Teaching Standards 4.0 rubric, which evaluates them based on

several criteria related to the promotion of agency as I have defined it here (a belief in one's capacities, including the capacity for learning and growth, and a sense that one's actions matter in a given context). For example, the rubric specifies that a proficient teacher "regularly reinforces and rewards effort," which aligns with Dweck's (2016) theory that people are more likely to try new things (which demonstrates belief in their capacity for growth) if they are praised for things which they can control, such as effort, as opposed to static characteristics, such as intelligence. The rubric also specifies that a proficient teacher will give students choices and develop learning experiences where inquiry "is valued."

The primary assumption of the second question (How, if at all, do teacher practices and teacher language vary based on the student or group of students with whom they are interacting?) is that teachers' speech and behaviors may vary based on the student with whom they are interacting or the dynamics of the class as a whole. While second question makes fewer assumptions, it still directed my data collection and analysis by focusing my attention on potential differences in teacher behavior. The post-observation interviews allowed me to ask for the teacher's perception of his/her own behavior as well as any underlying reasoning for it.

Sampling and Participants

The study focused on teacher-student interactions; therefore, participants consisted of teachers and their students. Because of Venetia County School District's restrictions on researcher-student interactions, I observed students but did not ask them to participate in the study in any other capacity.

In order to qualify for this study, teachers had to meet three criteria. First, they had to be ELA teachers who taught at least one class of each gender in the Shining Scholars Academy magnet program. Second, they had to teach at least two different academic levels within the same grade level, e.g., a standard and an honors section of seventh grade ELA. Thirdly, they had to express interest in reflecting more deeply on their teaching practices by examining their own talk. I expected that my relationship with the teachers would be collegial; my goal was that they would see me as a resource or a mirror that would allow them to see their teaching from a different perspective and that they would want to share their reflections with me to get additional feedback.

In order to recruit participants, I emailed the head teacher for the Shining Scholars Academy magnet program and outlined the goals of this study. I asked her if she knew of any teachers who might be interested in working with me, and she shared the names and emails of three teachers. Later, I learned that these three teachers were the only ELA teachers in the magnet program. I followed up with those teachers via email and included the details of the study by attaching the Letter of Informed Consent for Teachers. Mrs. Hughes was the first to respond, and she declined to participate in the study via email: "The purpose of this correspondence is to let you know that I am going to have to decline this opportunity to participate in the research because of the volume of responsibilities which I currently have. I can't add anything else to my table right now." After receiving Mrs. Hughes's email, I began to wonder if the teacher-participation requirements of my study were too onerous, so I emailed Mrs. Hughes to request a meeting to discuss revising the terms of the study. She agreed, and we met to discuss how to modify the study so that she would be able to participate. We agreed upon the revised methodology

described below. Later that week, I met with Mrs. Potter to share the changes that Mrs. Hughes and I had made, and she also agreed to participate. The third ELA teacher in the magnet program declined due to personal reasons.

Mrs. Potter was a European-American woman in her mid-twenties. She grew up in New York State but spent her entire teaching career in South Carolina. She had taught for five years, all of them at Green middle school. She was in her fourth year as a teacher in the single-gender magnet program during the completion of this study. Mrs. Potter taught standard and honors ELA to all of the seventh grade students in Shining Scholars Academy and described herself as eager to grow as a teacher. By participating in the study, Mrs. Potter hoped to continue to reflect on her teaching and learn about herself as a teacher: "I think it's going to be a good reflective process even for me. Um, because I'll be more, I guess, attentive to how I handle certain situations. Not to say that I'm not now, but I'm going to spend more time really thinking about what I do. And I think that's great because it goes back to me learning still."

Mrs. Hughes was an African-American woman in her late forties. She has been a teacher, an instructional coach, and an administrator in her home state of South Carolina for the past 23 years. The year of this study was her first year teaching in the magnet program and at Green Middle School. By participating in this study, Mrs. Hughes said she hoped to make "certain that I am effective in my approaches. I'm consistently utilizing effective instructional strategies to meet the needs of my students." She also said that she hoped "the Lord would provide" someone to do the same for her if she ever needed it.

Shining Scholars Academy magnet program has established admission criteria. The specificity of the selection criteria ensured a relatively high level of homogeneity among the student population in terms of their standardized test scores. However, my student sample was comprised of Black, Caucasian, and Latinx students. Most of the students were native English speakers; however, each teacher had one male student who was an English Language Learner. This sampling allowed me to describe the classroom talk and behavior of experienced, middle-level ELA teachers who work in a single-gender environment in detail while also including the added dimension of racial or ethnic background (Glesne, 2016, p. 51).

Table 3.1 Students' observed race organized by class section

Teacher	Gender of class section	Students enrolled	Number of European American students	Number of African American students	Number of Latinx students	Number of Asian students
Potter	Boys	21	2	17	1	1
Potter	Girls	16	6	8	2	0
Hughes	Boys	15	2	10	3	0
Hughes	Girls	18	7	8	2	1

According to their application process, students had to meet the following criteria in order to be considered for admission to Shining Scholars Academy. First, students had to be in grades five, six, or seven. Second, students had to score above the 75% on the normed district tests for math and English. If students were applying from another district, they had to score above the 75 percentile on a comparable, nationally normed achievement test. Third, students also had to provide teacher letters of recommendation. Fourth, students had to complete an interview process that included the collection of an

"impromptu writing sample." Additionally, students who were not zoned for Green MS had to provide their own transportation (Application Process, 2017). In general, middle level students range in age from 11 to 14 years of age.

Participation in this study was voluntary for teachers and students. Before data collection began, teachers, students, and parents/guardians were asked to sign a letter of informed consent and agree to participate in the study (See Appendix B). Participants were not compensated and could have withdrawn from the study at any time without repercussion. No participants chose to withdraw from the study. However, several students did not return their forms and other students returned forms that declined to give consent for their children to participate (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Student participation and consent rates organized by class section

Teacher	Gender of class section	Students enrolled	Consent forms returned	Students declining to participate
Potter	Boys	21	13	1
Potter	Girls	16	15	0
Hughes	Boys	15	9	3
Hughes	Girls	18	16	1

The recordings of classroom observations included all enrolled students, but the data collected about non-participating students was not transcribed or used in any data analysis or publications. In Mrs. Potter's class, there were no remarkable or unusual interactions between her and any of the non-participating students. However, in Mrs. Hughes's class, there were several lengthy disciplinary interactions between her and the students who declined to participate. While these interactions were revealing, I was unable to include them in my data or analysis.

Teacher identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms. Student identities were protected because I only recorded the student's first name along with observed race and gender. I also assigned numbers to students to use during transcription. No student names were included in any of the data analysis. I assigned these numbers by moving in order from the left front of the classroom to the right rear of the classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred in two classrooms to allow for comparison between cases and increase the construct validity of the study. Over the span of six weeks, I collected data in each classroom by conducting a pre-visit and a semi-structured teacher interview. The pre-visit allowed me to take detailed field notes on the classroom environment, and the teacher interview allowed me to record each teacher's stated beliefs about the nature of agency and how they believed they fostered student agency in their classrooms. The teacher interview also included a question about the teacher's goals for him/herself as they related to the use of talk in the classroom so that I could focus my observations so as to be useful to the teacher as well as meeting the goals of this study (Appendix A).

All recordings were taken using a hand-held Boocosa™ digital voice recorder and were transferred from the digital recorder to a password-protected laptop. All field notes were taken using a word-processor on a password-protected laptop. Finally, copies of all recordings and documents were backed up using a secure online storage service such as Dropbox. This online storage file also served as a database for the study.

Following the pre-visit and interview, I began collecting data by observing, recording, and taking field notes in each teacher's classroom once a week. I also

collected teacher lesson plans for the first lessons that I observed. During each visit, I observed at least one all-female class and one all-male class. As I observed, I made marginal notes or jotted down questions about things that I noticed during my observations. I used these notes and questions to conduct a semi-structured interview upon the completion of that day's observations. In order to accommodate the teacher-participants' schedules, I met with Mrs. Potter immediately following my observations because that was when she had her scheduled break. I met with Mrs. Hughes at the end of the school day, which meant that she taught one additional class between my observation of her and our follow-up meeting. During these interviews, which typically lasted for an average of 15 to 20 minutes, I asked questions such as, "I noticed that you did X, can you tell me about that?" or "Why did you choose to do X differently in these two classes?" The weekly follow-up also served as a form of member checking and allowed me to rethink how I was interpreting my observations from that day. After completing all other data collection, I interviewed the teacher participants using similar questions to those I asked in their initial interviews (Appendix A). Using multiple sources of evidence and building in member-checks for each teacher also served to increase the validity of the study.

To choose salient points and generate the questions for the weekly post-observation interviews, I relied on the two-part definition of agency given above a belief in (1) one's capacities, including the capacity for learning and growth, and (2) a sense that one's actions matter in a given context. Therefore, I looked for anything the teachers said or did that related to a student or class's capacities. I also made note of and inquired about any times that I noticed differences in the ways in which the teachers handled

similar situations in different class sections. For example, if these teachers talked about their students as "readers" or "writers," they were implying that their students have what it takes to read and write. Additionally, I looked for things that these teachers said or did that suggested their trust in their students' abilities, i.e., if she assigned challenging work or activities. I also looked for evidence of the degree of control over and responsibility for learning that teachers gave their students. For example, if the teacher gave students choices or uses an inquiry-based curriculum, they were turning over some control of the classroom to the students. I also considered the use of clear assessment criteria and rubrics as evidence that the teacher believed student actions matter in the classroom because they showed students exactly what they needed to do to achieve a particular grade.

I used the digital recordings to create transcripts of the data. I transcribed a total of 10 class periods for each teacher, which comprised of 5 observations of each gender. I also transcribed 5 of the follow-up interviews for each teacher and pre and post-observation interviews. In total, I transcribed approximately 500 minutes of classroom observations and 155 minutes of teacher interviews. I completed my initial round of coding as I transcribed the data. During this first round of coding, I took a holistic approach because I already had a "general idea of what to investigate in the data" (Saldaña, 2013). As a part of the holistic coding process, I looked for "episodes" in the data that related to the topic of agency. During the transcription process, I also began generating lists of salient points or themes that I began to notice in the data.

After completing the transcription process and the initial round of coding, I grouped the codes together to form categories or pattern codes. For example, the codes

"students sharing work" and "references to pop culture" were grouped together under the pattern code "connecting to students." Once I had developed my pattern codes/categories, I uploaded my data to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program and used those pattern codes/categories to create nodes. Lastly, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript looking for additional details that fit into each category/node.

As a final form of member checking, I sent each teacher the descriptions of their classrooms (Chapter 4) and requested that they informed me if they saw "anything that seems inaccurate or unclear." Mrs. Potter replied by sending an email, which included the following paragraph:

> I just finished reading your chapter on my classroom - WOW! You know, it's so amazing to read and see how other people perceive my work. It all seems so easy reading it on the screen! [Smiley face emojji] I think that you did a wonderful job; your words and descriptions are accurate. I now see that I say 'uhm' a lot! Haha [Lauging emojji] I wouldn't have any suggestions for you to change anything! I truly appreciate that you sent this for me to read.

Because Mrs. Potter was satisfied with my description of her classroom, I did not make any changes to it. Mrs. Hughes also responded via email:

> Thanks for sharing your review with me. I disagree with some parts of it. For instance, I don't think that I didn't provide enough time for my students to talk and share their perspectives. I understand that your observations are based on a limited time window that you were with us. Also, I don't concur with the noisy statement. I view it is a productive chaos. Based on my students' test data, I had more boys to jump 1 or more performance categories on the SC Ready Reading Assessment and all of my students did well.

Based on these concerns, I made changes to my description of Mrs. Hughes's classroom by changing some of the wording. For example, instead of saying that the classroom was "noisy," I described how the students were talking and laughing loudly.

Conclusion

As a researcher and educator, I aspire to the "role of transformer" as Glesne (2016) described it:

> As others read your story, you want them to identify with or be a witness to the problems, oppression, worries, joys, and dreams that are the collective human lot. By reflecting on others' lives in the light of their own experiences, readers acquire new insights and perspectives on some aspect of human interaction and, perhaps, be moved to action. (p. 225).

I hope that my work will prompt educators to reflect on their own teaching and come to a deeper understanding of how teachers position students for agency in the classroom. Ultimately, I hope that they will use that understanding to adopt language, practices, and pedagogical stances that will promote agency for all of their students.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Within what Holland et al. (1998) "figured world" of the classroom, the teacher assumes the powerful position of authority, source of knowledge, and primary speaker. In contrast, the student is positioned as having relatively less authority, knowledge, and voice. Freire (2014) aptly describes this prototypical set-up as the "banking model" of education in which teachers "deposit" knowledge into the (presumably empty) minds of their students. Freire (2014) also emphasizes the ways in which the banking model of education oppresses marginalized students and reproduces unjust social systems. Because this model and these traditional roles disempower and silence students, students often have few opportunities to develop a sense of their own agency in the classroom. According to Holland et al. (1998), "Persons look at the world from positions into which they are persistently cast" (p. 44). Too often, in the world of the classroom, students do not see themselves as having the power to act upon themselves and their environment. In short, the way that students are "persistently cast" in traditional models of education limits students' opportunities to see themselves as agentive individuals with valuable knowledge and experiences to contribute within the context of the classroom.

As I spent time gathering, transcribing, and analyzing the data from these two classrooms, I was attentive to the positions into which teachers "persistently cast" themselves and their students. My goal was to identify the ways in which teachers positioned their students as agents within the classroom. I asked myself and my

participants (Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Hughes) how they created opportunities for students to see themselves as people with the power to speak, act, and change their environment. How did or didn't these teachers show their students that their voices and actions mattered? A secondary goal of this study was to determine if there were any differences in the ways in which teachers positioned their students based on the identity markers of their students, such as race, class, and gender. As I coded and analyzed the data, I also paid close attention to students' words and actions because these student responses demonstrate how students perceived their positionalities within these particular classrooms. I learned that students were able to articulate and act upon teacher expectations. Additionally, students who perceived themselves as having power within the classroom were more likely to regulate their own behavior and learning.

In this chapter, I describe the conversations and observations that I coded as important to the ways in which these teachers positioned their students for agency within their classrooms. Here, I describe and analyze my observations of each teacher separately, and in chapter five, I use the work of Delueze and Guattari (1987) to look across these analyses and observations and draw conclusions about the ways in which teachers can foster a sense of student agency within their classrooms.

Mrs. Potter

Mrs. Potter was a European-American woman in her mid-twenties. She was petite with straight, shoulder-length brown hair and large blue eyes. Although she wore very little other jewelry, both of her nostrils were pierced, and she had gauged ears. She favored trendy clothes and often wore large scarves and riding boots. Mrs. Potter grew up in New York State but spent her entire teaching career in South Carolina. She had

been teaching for five years, all of them at the same middle school where she worked at the time of this study. That year was her fourth year as a teacher in the single-gender magnet program. In our pre-interview, she described herself as a "facilitator" who tried to "keep a positive attitude at all times" in the classroom. Mrs. Potter wanted her classroom to be a place where "kids can have fun while they're learning [because] it makes learning easier for them." She wanted her students to be "curious," "inquisitive," and "self-driven," and feel "pride in their learning." Mrs. Potter's teaching persona and classroom management style were informal, and she described many of her routines having developed "organically." She frequently referred to her students as "kids," "kiddos," "girls," "boys," and "honey" or "hon" in our interviews and in her interactions with them.

The walls in Mrs. Potter's classroom were covered in posters ranging from art to education to motivation. Among other things, there was a print of Van Gogh's "Starry Night," a picture of a kitten hanging from a branch with a caption reading "Hang in there," and infographics about the writing process. There was a reading area in the corner opposite the door. It consisted of a colorfully painted rocking chair, a lamp on a painted table, and an old futon sofa littered with pillows. There was a basket of stuffed animals tucked under the table, mostly giraffes, which the students cuddled during independent reading time. There were several bookshelves in the room, and all of them were cluttered with books, lamps, and trinkets. Student desks were arranged in groups of three or four, and her desk was in the corner farthest from the door. Files and papers were stacked on the surface beside another lamp and other assorted personal items, such as coffee cups and picture frames.

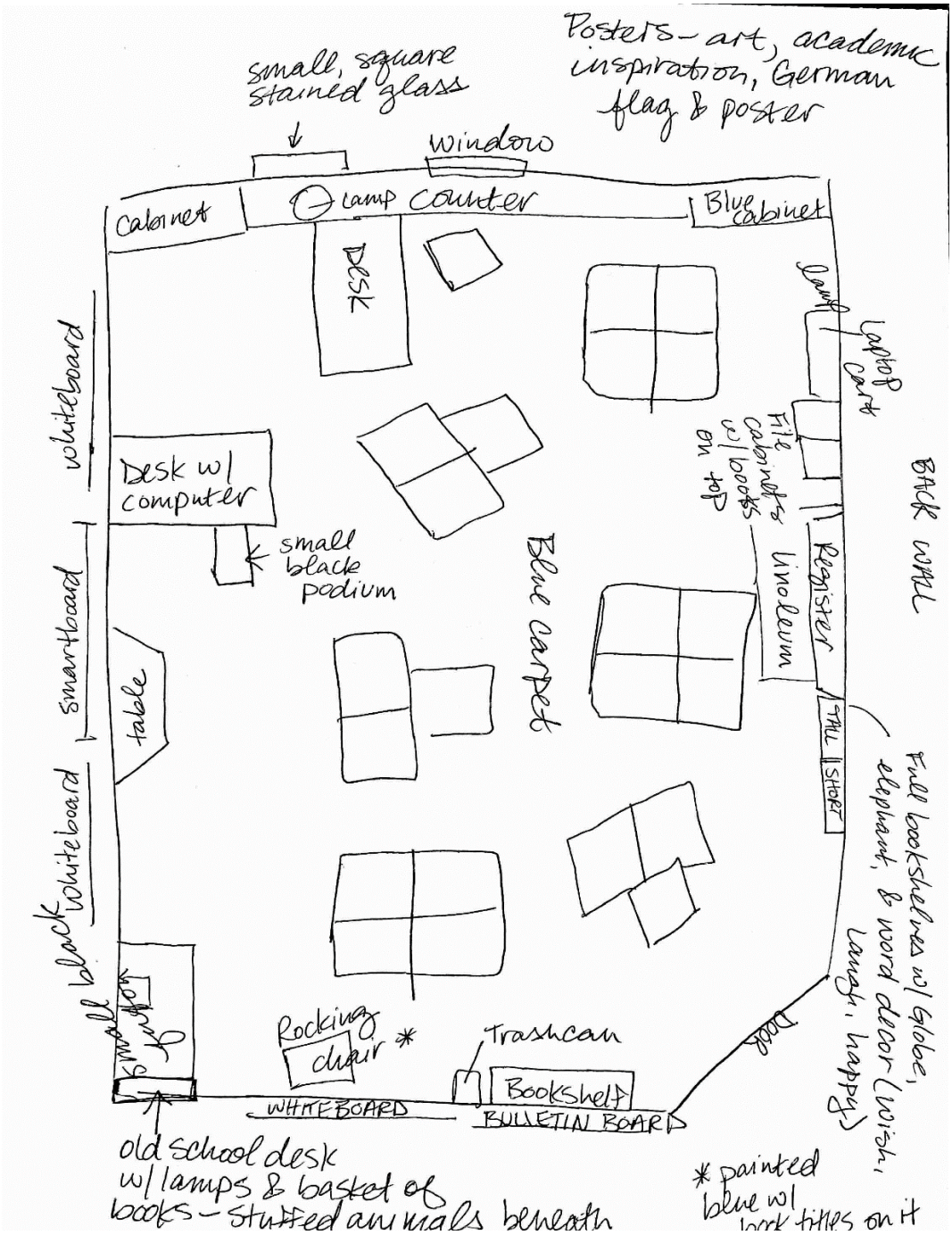

Figure 4.1 *Sketch of Mrs. Potter's Classroom*

Mrs. Potter Teaching Classes

On most days, students e 4.1ntered the room without lining up in the hallway first. They often talked with one another as they did and generally seated themselves with

limited prompting from Mrs. Potter. While students entered the room, she greeted them, straightened desks, and generally tidied up the room amid the student chatter. Each day began with bell-work, which included a word of the day and five minutes of writing time. As students got settled, Mrs. Potter read them the word of the day and verbally reminded them of her expectations: "Alright ladies, you know the drill. Five minutes. Alright girls, talking stops" (3 May 2018). On most days, students were writing or typing silently by the time the bell rang. The prompts to which they responded were either free choice or creative writing prompts. On the days when students were allowed to choose their own topics, they typically wrote about the things that were happening in their lives. For example, one student shared that she went to Florida, another that she was going to get her tonsils removed, and a third that he played games on his Xbox for the entire weekend (24 April 2018). On other days, Mrs. Potter provided students with a picture or a story-starter. For example, one day, there was a picture of a castle being carried away by a cloud like a hot air balloon. The prompt read: "Tell this story" (22 March 2018). Another day, the prompt read simply, "He looked at me and growled, 'A talking wolf is the least of your concerns.' Finish the story" (3 May 2018). When the timer rang indicating that five minutes had passed, Mrs. Potter allowed students to finish their thoughts or sentences while she went over the agenda. Her words to them on May 3rd typified the way that she made this transition: "So wrap up those sentences. I am going to, you know how this goes. Go over the agenda. So, the agenda today girls, very straightforward. After we share out the prompt, we're gonna go ahead and get ready for our Socratic Seminar today." The sharing period during those first few minutes of class were informal and noisy. Students tended to be very vocal during this time, calling out to

their peers to choose them and responding happily when they were chosen and with disappointed groans when they were not. However, once the speaker began reading, the class typically fell silent to listen.

After finishing the bell-work and agenda routines, Mrs. Potter introduced and gave directions regarding the main activities for the day. As shown in Table 4.1, each class period was different. However, the way that Mrs. Potter introduced the day's activities was consistent. She stood at the front of the room, near the Smartboard and highlighted information for students by pointing to the directions or example on the board. Additionally, Mrs. Potter's assignment introductions regularly included four elements. First, she put the day's activities into the larger context of the unit by describing how they were valuable and how they connected to what they had been learning or would be learning. Second, Mrs. Potter gave directions explaining what she wanted students to do. According to Mrs. Potter, if the activity or strategies were familiar to students, the directions that she gave were generally very brief; however, if she was introducing something new, she intentionally gave much more in-depth explanations and showed the students a model of what she was expecting. The language that Mrs. Potter used to give directions was also consistent and typically focused on reassuring students that they were capable of completing the task at hand. She described tasks as "easy," "simple," or "straightforward," and talked in terms of "expectation" and "responsibility." Third, she asked students whether they would prefer to work in silence or with music, and finally, if the activity was an independent one, she invited the students to get comfortable while they worked by allowing them to move throughout the room.

Table 4.1 Primary Lesson Components in Mrs. Potter's Classroom

Observation Day	**Lesson Components** (excluding bell work routine)
22 March 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter introduced the upcoming Poetry Café and described the poetry reading rubric to students. • Small group work: Students brainstormed what a Poetry Café "looks like, sounds like, and feels like." • Whole-class discussion: Students shared and discussed the ideas generated during the brainstorming session. • Independent writing: Students wrote poems to share during the Poetry Café.
28 March 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter reminded students of the expectations for the day. • Student performances: Students read or recited the poems they have written. Once all students shared at least once, volunteers continued to share favorite poems.
9 April 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter introduced the poem for the day, which was "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. • Independent work time: Students read the poem and answered analysis questions about it. • Whole class discussion: Students shared and discussed their interpretations of the poem.
4	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter introduced Twin Oaks, a real-world utopian community in Virginia. • Independent research: Students explored the Twin Oaks website. • Video: Class watched a video about Twin Oaks together. • Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter introduced an article about utopian communities and gave directions for independent work time. • Independent reading: Students read the article and took Cornell notes. • Whole class discussion: Mrs. Potter asked students to share the most interesting thing that they have learned so far.
24 April 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Potter introduced a new strategy, the dialectical journal. • Independent or paired reading: Students read the assigned novel independently or in pairs and completed their dialectical journals. The girls' class read *Gated*, and the boys' class read *Among the Hidden.*
3 May 2018	• Whole class discussion: Mrs. Potter asked students to describe the expectations for a Socratic Seminar. • Structured whole class discussion: Students participated in a Socratic Seminar.

On most days, Mrs. Potter and her students were so engaged in their work that the end of the class period seemed to come as a surprise, and therefore, she did not have a lengthy routine for closing class. Typically, if students were working when the bell rang, Mrs. Potter reminded them of what they would need for the next day as they packed up. If the class was having a discussion when the bell rang, students waited for the speaker to finish and then began packing up, again to the sound of Mrs. Potter's reminders. With the exception of the day that students had snacks for the Poetry Café, Mrs. Potter did not ask them to straighten desks or clean up before they left, and students left as soon as they were ready. While these scenarios were typical, one thing was consistent: Mrs. Potter made sure that the last thing she said to her students each day was positive, such as "Have an awesome day! Do awesome things!" (March 22) In several of our conversations, she emphasized that staying positive is important to her, so she ended each class by trying to get her students to focus on something positive:

> I tell them, "Do awesome things!" I'll tell them to go out and learn something and report back to me and tell me something that they learned. I will always, you know, just provide some, you know, "Have a great day! I hope something great happens." So I try to provide that positive thing. Um, and sometimes like, with the girls, especially as they go out the door, you know, " I love you. Have a great day." And they'll say it back to me. So, it's really awesome. So, and uh, yeah. Trying to stay positive.

Mrs. Potter Positioning Students

Mrs. Potter described middle school as a critical point in students' education and believed that she could "make or break a student—whether they like school or not." Therefore, she saw positioning students for agency in the classroom as "incredibly important because then it gives them a sense of independence." I identified four ways in which Mrs. Potter positioned her students as agents in the classroom:

- valuing students' voices
- connecting to students' lives
- communicating expectations
- disrupting the banking model of education/living as a learner.

Valuing student voices.

Mrs. Potter structured each day's lesson to include multiple opportunities for students to express their ideas and share their work. While students were speaking or reading, she faced the speaker, made eye-contact, and nodded. Likewise, she encouraged her students to listen attentively and respectfully to one another and explicitly taught them how to do so. For example, during the Socratic Seminar, she spoke to them about the importance of making eye contact and trying to understand their peers' points of view. By prioritizing respect and dialogue, Mrs. Potter tried to create a context in which students comfortably shared their lives, interests, and emotions.

Over the course of this study, I observed two examples of Mrs. Potter using the structure of her lesson to position her students as agents in the classroom. In the first example, she devoted the class period to a "Poetry Café" because her students expressed "sadness" that their first Poetry Café was school-wide and said that they wished that they could have had a Poetry Café "just for our classes." In the second example, students engaged in a Socratic Seminar with minimal guidance from her during the conversation. In both instances, students were invested in the activities and maturely addressed difficult topics such as bullying, racism, and societal pressure to conform.

Poetry Café. The week before the Poetry Café, Mrs. Potter began laying the groundwork for the day. She asked students to work in groups and brainstorm about

what they thought a Poetry Café would look like, sound like, and feel like. She allowed the girls to complete this activity verbally but required the boys to write their lists[4]. Students seemed to enjoy this activity and described their ideas using vivid, sensory language: tea and snacks, dim lights, bongo drums or jazz music in the background, people dressed in black, whispering, etc. When students shared their lists, Mrs. Potter listened and then repeated their words to the class. This listening and repeating was one of the hallmarks of Mrs. Potter's teaching style.

Mrs. Potter also demonstrated that she heard her students' ideas through action by setting up the Café to their specifications. On the day of the Poetry Café, the desks were in their usual groupings. However, they were covered with black plastic tablecloths, and there were battery-powered tea lights at each "table." The lights were dim, and jazz music played softly as students entered. The counter on the right-hand side of the classroom was cleared and ready for the snacks and drinks that students brought with them. To fit the occasion, Mrs. Potter wore an oversized gray sweater and a black scarf with dark jeans and black riding boots. Both classes were excited about the Poetry Café, and eagerly deposited their snacks and began the bell-work prompt that read: "Go ahead and write about whatever you'd like!" When the five-minute timer rang for the girls, Mrs. Potter revealed that she, too, was excited about the day: "Hi, people! I'm not even going to bother going over what we're doing today because we're having our poetry café today, and that's really about it. Um, so, we can go ahead and start doing it!"

[4] This instance represents one of two times that Mrs. Potter differentiated activities by gender. In her post-interview, she expressed that she was impressed with the boys' lists and that she believed the girls would have benefited from writing their lists as well. The other example of gender differentiation was when she assigned a different novel to the classes based on the gender of the class.

After students shared their bell-work, Mrs. Potter changed the message on the Smartboard to one written in a large, fancy white script on a black background: "Welcome to Mrs. Potter's poetry café. Please sit down and relax! Enjoy fine poetry from your classmates." Once the Poetry Café began, the students ran the class. The first volunteers recited their poems and chose the next volunteers and so forth. Mrs. Potter sat beside the podium and listened, marking each rubric quickly after the performance. She positioned herself as an audience member and allowed students to take charge both of their poems and their performances.

Throughout the class period, students were attentive to and respectful of their peers. In most cases, this meant they listened quietly to the speaker, waited silently if the speaker paused to look at his/her notes, and snapped their fingers at the end of each reading/recitation. In once instance, however, a male student decided to perform his poem as a rap and brought along his own music for a beat. He beat-boxed and then rapped his poem, pausing several times when he forgot his lines. The class was excited by this performance, but the speaker was disappointed. He asked Mrs. Potter if he could perform the rap again so that he could get it right and record it. Mrs. Potter granted this request, and during his second performance of the poem, seven boys got out of their seats and danced. Although the dancers were very enthusiastic, they were also silent and did not interrupt the performance.

The joyfulness of this small dance-party was one of many emotions on display during the Poetry Café. Students expressed their feelings nervousness, eagerness, excitement, and disappointment in relation to their performances. However, they also expressed a wide range of emotions through the poems that they shared, both those that

they wrote and those written by others. Students shared poems ranging from lighthearted (such as an "Ode to Ramen Noodles" or "Chocolate Milk,") to emotional (such as poems about "Two Hearts" falling in love) to serious (such as poems about racism, bullying, and suicide). For example, after one student shared her poem about racism, the class cheered and snapped. Mrs. Potter cheered with them, and when the class was quiet again, she said, "I commend you for touching such a sensitive topic. That's amazing. That's very powerful. […] You kids are awesome." Students' willingness to share these intense emotions suggested that they felt comfortable and safe with their peers and Mrs. Potter, and their trust was honored during the Poetry Café.

Socratic Seminar. I observed Mrs. Potter's classes participate in their third Socratic Seminar. During this class period, Mrs. Potter relied on the students to set expectations and moderate their own conversation, and they did so successfully. The desks were arranged in a circle when students arrived in the room. Because this was not a new activity, Mrs. Potter began the conversation by asking students to remind her of the expectations: "Ok. So, let's just have a quick conversation here about what's expected of us. What guidelines and expectations are expected of us within a Socratic Seminar. Just as a quick refresher, yes?" Students raised their hands and shared the expectations that they remembered. The list that they shared demonstrated that Mrs. Potter had explicitly discussed what a robust and respectful conversation should look like with them in the past. They generated the following list: 1) Everyone must speak at least 5 times, (2) participants wanting to ask a new question should raise one finger, while those wishing to answer the current question should raise a fist, (3) if possible, they should let the conversation "flow" instead of raising hands, (4) Mrs. Potter should not be involved, (5)

participants should make eye contact with one another, (6) participants should refer to the text, and (7) the Seminar is a discussion, "not a debate." As they generated this list, Mrs. Potter repeated each student's words to ensure that the entire class heard the directions. She also validated their answers:

> **S1**: Make eye contact.
> **Mrs. Potter**: Say that again.
> **S1:** Make eye contact to the person you're talking to.
> **Mrs. Potter**: Yeah, make eye-contact to the person you're talking to, very good. Anything else, girls? Is this a debate?
> **S2:** No! I was just going to say that!
> **Mrs. Potter**: No. It's not a debate. Alright. We are having a dialogue. Seminars are conversations. Um, how do you respond to someone if you don't agree with them?
> **S3**: As politely as possible, you try to see where they're coming from.
> **Mrs. Potter**: Yeah. Absolutely right. As politely as possible, say, " You know, I see where you're coming from, but let's take a look at this." Very good! Um, I don't think I'm missing anything. Am I missing anything, girls? You girls pretty much covered everything.

Throughout the Socratic Seminar, Mrs. Potter and the students adhered closely to these rules. In the girls' class, she sat in the circle with the students, but in the boys' class, she walked around the room, using proximity to keep them on task. This was the only time that I observed Mrs. Potter using different behavior management techniques on the basis of gender. During both class periods, Mrs. Potter did not speak for the first half the conversations, but did begin to offer slightly more guidance as time began to run short. During their conversation, the girls focused primarily on sharing their opinions on one particular article about a law regulating baby names in Denmark, and she reminded them to discuss the other pieces that they studied. The boys had opposite problem; they "bounced around" different topics and questions too quickly to have a sustained dialogue about any one story. Mrs. Potter reminded them to stick with one question for a few minutes before asking a new one. After this reminder, the boys settled into a

conversation about what they would do if they lived in the society described in "Harrison Bergeron."

Connecting with students' lives.

The regular, community-building practices of sharing work and ideas in Mrs. Potter's room also provided opportunities for Mrs. Potter to connect with her students about their interests and lives outside of the classroom.

Regardless of the rest of the daily schedule, Mrs. Potter made sure to make time for students to share their bell-work responses. During this sharing time, Mrs. Potter typically stood at the front of the room or sat on an empty student desk to listen. The classroom community engaged in conversations during this time, particularly when the speakers were sharing stories about their lives outside of school. When students shared their creative writing, Mrs. Potter typically celebrated their work by clapping with the rest of the class and offering verbal praise. However, when students shared their free-writes, Mrs. Potter habitually leaned forward to listen with her hand on her cheek, and her facial expressions often mirrored those of the speaker. When a student finished reading, she frequently asked questions and follow-up questions or shared similar experiences that she had. These exchanges sounded like a casual conversation between friends and suggested Mrs. Potter's interest in the details of her students' lives:

> **Student 1**: We didn't have school Friday. Friday I went to my grandma house. Saturday, me and my friend are going to Sandhills. Ok, on Saturday, my friends are coming down from New Jersey.
> **Mrs. Potter:** Oh cool!
> **Student 1:** And Monday, I'm not coming to school. And my sister might have to get her tonsils removed because something's gone wrong with her throat.
> **Mrs. Potter:** Oh, geez. Yeah. Well, that's a bummer for her.
> **Student 1:** At least she gets to have ice cream.

> **Mrs. Potter:** She gets to have ice cream, right? Is this your older sister? Ok. Well, let her know that we're thinking about her. Alright, cool.

Mrs. Potter also connected with her students by sharing and expressing interests their pop-culture interests. Her stance appeared to help students feel comfortable making connections between their experiences in the classroom and their interests and experiences outside of the classroom. Their creative writing prompts were filled with references to pop culture. For example, one student used the castle of clouds prompt (see above) to express his fascination with the *Black Panther* movie:

> My family and I live in a large house. Our house is hanging over some clouds. Everyday we see new wonderful places. One time my house got stuck on top of the Eiffel Tower. Our rope, our rope, and house is made of vibranium. One time we flew right into Wakanda. King T'Challa and I were best friends in high school, so he hooked us up with some vibranium.

Mrs. Potter appeared to make the connection to the movie because when the student described himself as best friends with one of the characters, she shook with laugher. Her familiarity with this film suggested to her students that she had interests outside of the classroom. Students also used the first few minutes of class to share pop-culture references that connected to what the group was currently studying. Again, as a rule, Mrs. Potter responded to these connections enthusiastically and by positioning herself as a learner who was interested both in the lives and ideas of her students:

> **Student 2:** Ok, I have something about utopia/dystopia!
> **Mrs. Potter:** Oh! You do?
> **Student 2:** So, yesterday, I was watching *The Defenders* on Netflix, and it was this place […] and he said something about it's a dystopia. I don't know. Something.
> **Mrs. Potter:** Ok, so you have a connection with something that—it's on Netflix? It's called *The Defenders?* Is it like a Marvel comic type thing? I think I've seen it on like my little feed, when I was scrolling through. Is it good? Maybe I'll watch that. I like getting new TV shows from you kids. That's cool.

In these exchanges, Mrs. Potter appeared interested in learning from her students and talked about her interest in pop-culture. Additionally, by allowing students the freedom to share their lives, ideas, and interests with the class, she created a space in which students had the time to listen and connect to one another.

Mrs. Potter also worked to connect with her students through the structure and contents of her lesson plans and classroom. Her lessons included carefully chosen texts to honor her students' interests and cultural backgrounds. The majority of her students were African American, and she regularly included work by African American authors, such as Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou in her curriculum. Her classroom, which was filled with lamps, furniture, and other comforts of home, represented another effort to bridge gap between home and school. Connecting was a priority for Mrs. Potter, so in addition to creating a home-like environment, she always tried to "think of ways I can connect something that I'm doing in the class to my personal life. They love to know what I'm doing in my personal life."

Communicating expectations.

Mrs. Potter communicated her expectations to her students before each activity. If she was setting expectations regarding an assignment, she shared detailed expectations with her students verbally and in writing via google classroom. These details often included examples and rubrics to highlight her expectations for their achievement, which allowed students to self-monitor while they worked on an assignment or prepared to participate in an activity. For example, before students started writing their original poems for the Poetry Café, Mrs. Potter shared the rubric that she would be using to score their performances. The rubric included descriptions of eye contact, preparation, pitch,

pauses, clarity of speech, and enthusiasm, and Mrs. Potter gave students brief examples of each one to help students understand her expectations:

> "Pitch is the way that you inflect your voice. If you have kind of a low pitch in your voice, that sometimes gives you kind of a low feeling. Or, if you're just very excited and you want to talk very excitedly, and you're just up there, like [Student's name] over there…*laughs with students*...then, that's where you get the emotion part—of you're feeling either excited or really kind of low."

In this instance, Mrs. Potter changed the pitch of her voice to match her descriptions, thereby modeling her expectations for students. On the day of the Poetry Café, students demonstrated that they had understood her expectations. Most students had their poems memorized so that they could make unbroken eye contact with the audience. Their performances were enthusiastic, and included the variations in pitch and speed that Mrs. Potter described in the rubric.

In addition to acting as a model for speaking performances, Mrs. Potter shared written models with her students when assigning written assignments. For example, when she assigned the dialectical journal, she shared an example of a dialectical journal entry completed by a former student. After sharing the example, she talked students through the strengths and weakness of the example to ensure that they understood her expectations. As she described this assignment, she frequently used the word "responsible" to describe these expectations: "But while you read, ladies, what you are going to be responsible for doing is collecting quotes that really stand out to you in each chapter of this novel."

In contrast to the way that she introduced written work, Mrs. Potter was typically less specific when setting expectations for student behavior during an activity, which gave students the opportunity to create the process for themselves. For example, the

directions that she gave to students during the Poetry Café were sparse. She told the girls class that they were about to "transition" to the Poetry Café and verbally instructed them to "pass out the other stuff" while she passed out napkins and to "go ahead and get yourselves ready. Get your poems out." After this brief moment of direction, she put on jazz music and passed out napkins. The atmosphere was festive as girls passed out chips, donuts, homemade cookies, and banana chips. They laughed and talked with one another as they moved from table to table, sharing whatever food they brought with their classmates. A similar scene played out in the boys' class, except the boys brought in several two-liters of soda as well as snacks. To avoid spills, Mrs. Potter decided to pour the drinks at the back counter while the boys passed out snacks. She called groups by table to get their drinks. They waited in line quietly and without horseplay and then brought their drinks back to their tables. There was an excited hum of conversation as students looked over their poems and tried to convince their classmates that they didn't get the cookies, which they had already eaten. In each of these cases, Mrs. Potter did not specifically direct the movements of her students by telling them *how* to accomplish the task of sharing snacks. Instead, her lack of direction allowed them to figure out the logistics, thereby positioning them as capable individuals. Students rose to her expectations and accomplished the task efficiently.

Disrupting the banking model of education/Living as a learner.

Mrs. Potter frequently disrupted the traditional teacher/student dialectic by consistently demonstrating respect for the knowledge of her students and positioning herself as a listener and co-learner in the classroom. She described her goal for herself as a teacher as to "always keep learning myself because I think some teachers just kind of

find themselves in a position where they stop learning, and I especially like learning from the kids. Because there's things that I don't know that they know." She also reinforced students' sense that they are in a safe space by admitting that there were things she did not know, freeing them to admit not-knowing without fear of embarrassment. Because positionalities are relative, the positions of her students shifted when Mrs. Potter took the stance of listener and co-learner. By empowering her students in these ways, Mrs. Potter positioned them as people who had ideas and voices and whose actions mattered.

Mrs. Potter's introduction to Dialectical Journals exemplified her teacher-as-learner stance:

> You're gonna finish a little bit more reading today after I go through this concept of the dialectical journals. Um, it's really easy. Very, very easy in fact, that I think that many of you have already had to do something like this already. So, you know how we always do Socratic Seminars, right? So this is going to help you even more with our Socratic Seminar that we have on this novel and then a little bit on articles that you girls find to share with the class. So, a dialectical journal. What is it? So when I don't know what something means, I go to the google machine. So. I'm gonna type in dialectical. […] Google can solve most problems. Not all, but most! *Laughs.* Once I tried googling how to cut my hair, and it was a bad idea.

Here, Mrs. Potter assured students that they were capable of completing the assignment by describing it as "very, very easy" and reminding them that it was similar to work they had done in the past. The main objective of the assignment (which she explained after this introduction to the term "dialectical") was for students to choose a quote that they found meaningful from each chapter and then connect it to the big idea or essential questions of the unit. Finally, Mrs. Potter explicitly connected this assignment to the wider context of the unit.

During our interview, Mrs. Potter explained that she recognized that the name of this assignment might intimidate students, so she wanted them to see how it connected to something with which they are already familiar (the Socratic Seminar). She also helped them to feel less intimidated by deliberately positioning herself as a learner:

> Oftentimes, when I say words like "dialectical," they get very nervous because they don't know what it means, so that's why I went ahead, and I went to google. Um, and I rolled it out with them that way, and I think when I do stuff like that, they can see that the teacher needs to google something sometimes, and then I think that makes them feel more comfortable. (SH interview 24 April 2018)

Finally, by mentioning her failed attempt to cut her own hair, Mrs. Potter used self-deprecating humor to show that she, too, made mistakes in the learning process. In fact, this was just one of many instances when Mrs. Potter worked to show students she does not know everything by positioning herself as a learner.

As she explained the assignment, Mrs. Potter continued to explain the ways in which the assignment was a valuable one. Besides describing how the notes that they took would be helpful in the Socratic Seminar, she also demonstrated that the assignment had intrinsic value by telling a story about herself as a reader. She described her excitement upon reading the first page of *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Greene. She told the class that she made a connection with that book, and "even took a picture of [the first page], and I posted it. I shared it with all of my friends." During out interview, Mrs. Potter explained that she told this story because she wanted her students to understand that noticing interesting quotes and making connections to the text were things that she did as an adult:

> I always try and think of ways I can connect something that I'm doing in the class to my personal life. They love to know what I'm doing in my personal life. They're 7th graders. Um, and too, I think that also lets them

> know that I do a lot of the things in my life as an adult that I'm asking them to do as a child so they can say, "Oh, this has purpose. I'm going to be doing this when I'm in college. I'm going to be doing this when I'm an adult."

Mrs. Potter's desire to show students that their work has "purpose" demonstrated her respect for their time and effort and therefore encouraged them to see themselves as people whose time and work are valuable. She also explained that taking the time to convince them that the assignment was *worth* doing also minimized students' sense that they were doing the assignment simply because she asked them to do so.

Mrs. Hughes

Mrs. Hughes was an African-American woman in her late forties. She wore her hair cropped close and used styling product to spike it. With the exception of the day that she wore blue shirt, Mrs. Hughes dressed exclusively in black professional attire. She usually wore chunky necklaces and matching earring. Mrs. Hughes had worked as an educator in her home state of South Carolina for 23 years. Over the course of her career, she served as a teacher, an instructional coach, and an administrator. This was her first year teaching in the magnet program and at the school. Mrs. Hughes's goal was to "help move 100% of my students to the next level" and to "empower students to be positive citizens." She described her classroom as a place where the students were "doing the doing," and she was "just monitoring the process." She wanted her students to see themselves in "a positive light, like, 'you're gifted. You're talented','" and she believed that students had different types of gifts. Mrs. Hughes focused on structure, productivity, and accountability in her classroom, and her teaching style was shaped by her close adherence to the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* initiative promoted by the school.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the desks in Mrs. Hughes's room were arranged into groups of four, clustered around the large podium at the center of the classroom. There was also a table against the back wall opposite the Smartboard. Mrs. Hughes's desk was in the far corner of the room and was clear of personal items except for a framed photo of her grandson. She had paired the desk with a table, forming an L-shape that closed off the corner of the room. Mrs. Hughes had arranged milk crates filled with student work-folders on the back counter below the window. She consistently wrote the day's standards, the get-started, and agenda on the white boards. There were various laminated educational posters on three of the walls. Some of the posters were handmade, such as the poster that read "Rules: No profanity. Be respectful of self and others. Be the best you can be." Behind Mrs. Hughes's desk hung professionally published posters describing the processes of writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading. The back wall of the classroom was blank, except for a small no-bullying sign above the door. Approximately half of the bookshelves were empty or partially empty.

Mrs. Hughes Teaching Classes

Mrs. Hughes stood by the door before each class and ensured that students were lined up and quiet before entering the classroom. Once she allowed them inside, students chatted with one another as they found their desks and waited for the classroom helper of the day to pass out the folders. This process generally took several minutes because student helpers usually chose to carry the milk crates around the classroom and dig in the crate for the necessary folders at each table. On most days, Mrs. Hughes began the class by starting with "good things," a routine from *Capturing Kids' Hearts*. She started the conversation by sharing a good thing happening in her life like celebrating her birthday or

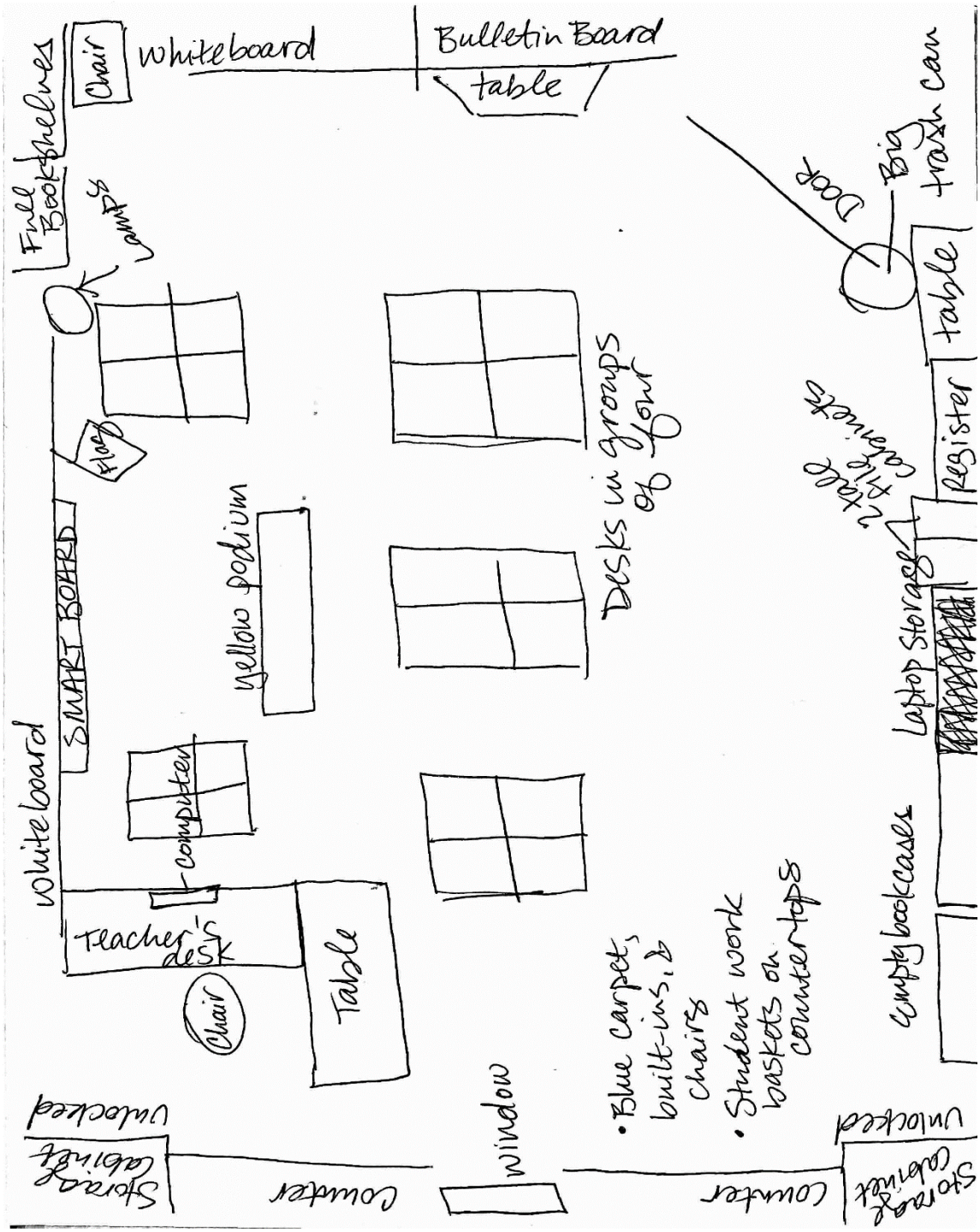

Figure 4.2 *Sketch of Mrs. Hughes's Classroom*

telling a story about her grandson. Then she invited students to share. Her words to students on March 13th were typical of how she initiated the sharing process: "Two people. Good things. Chromebooks at a 45 degree angle. Mouths closed. Sitting up straight. Eyes on me. Whenever you hear the number one. Five, four, three, two, and one. Yes. [Student name]." After students shared their good thing, Mrs. Hughes would respond briefly by asking a follow up question or saying "cool beans" or "awesome." Although students were often reminded not to have "sidebar conversations" during this time, many students in the class jumped into the conversation and asked for more details about their peers' "good things."

After completing the "good things" routine, Mrs. Hughes would project what she called "the bell-work" for the day on the Smartboard. The bell-work was usually a test-prep activity drawn from the Common Lit database, which students completed on paper before submitting their work online to be graded. Mrs. Hughes often began the bell-work routine with a countdown from five and a reminder to students about her expectations to them:

> Mouths closed. Pencils down. On your paper. Chromebooks closed. Sit up straight. Eyes on me. Five, four, three, two, one. Final time. All eyes. Chromebooks out. Your paper should be out. You're writing the answers, yes, for "An Urgent Message." And you're reading. You have ten minutes. Go ahead.

On most days, students chatted with one another as they settled in to their work, and Mrs. Hughes went to sit at her computer. There she set a timer, turned on jazz music, and worked on her computer or her phone. She often used this time to go through her grade book and talk to students about missing work. Students frequently asked to go to the bathroom or get water.

After the ten minutes designated for bell-work, Mrs. Hughes would turn off the music and move to stand behind the podium to go over the Common Lit. questions with students. During this time, she called on volunteers, asking them to read the question and then share their answer. After a volunteer shared, Mrs. Hughes would respond in one of two ways, either by briefly affirming the student's answer or by asking the class "How many of us agree that the answer is _____?" She went over each question thoroughly because she wanted to ensure that students understood the key vocabulary as well as the reasoning behind each answer. Mrs. Hughes usually spent the first half of class on the "good things" and bell-work routines before moving on to the main activity for the day. As shown in Table 2, activities varied from day to day, and different classes rarely worked on the same activity because the students progressed through the lesson plans at different rates. Mrs. Hughes described her girls classes as being on track or ahead, and her boys' classes as being between three and five days "behind instructionally." Because the girls usually completed an activity before the boys began it, Mrs. Hughes often used the girls' work as an example for the boys. For example, she showed the girls' comic strips about "Three Skeleton Key" while describing the assignment to the boys. She explained that the girls were able to understand "cognitive modeling," but that the boys needed something more "concrete." Once she finished giving instructions, she would tell the students how much time they had left in the class period to complete their work and set a timer.

Table 4.2 Primary Lesson Components in Mrs. Hughes's Classroom

Observation Day	**Lesson Components** (Excluding "good things" and bell work routines)	
	Girls Class	**Boys Class**
27 February 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes gave directions regarding the small group assignment to teach a section of the short story "Three Skeleton Key." • Small group work: Girls worked together to plan how they would teach their assigned section.	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes reviewed the elements of plot. • Shared reading: Student volunteers read aloud from "Three Skeleton Key."
6 March 2018	• Independent work time: Girls completed a reading comprehension quiz. • Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes gave directions regarding how to complete a graphic organizer on character development. • Independent work time: Girls completed the graphic organizer. • Whole class discussion: Volunteers shared their completed graphic organizers.	• Independent work time: Boys worked on stems packets. • Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes gave directions regarding the small group assignment to teach a section of the short story "Three Skeleton Key." • Small group work: Boys worked together to plan how they would teach their assigned section.
13 March 2018	• Guided practice: Mrs. Hughes worked with the class to annotate an article about cyber-bullying that she had copied into a word document. After listening to a student read a paragraph aloud, Mrs. Hughes used the "comments" as a place to type a summary of the paragraph's contents.	• Student presentations: Boys taught their assigned sections of "Three Skeleton Key." Students who were not presenting completed a graphic organizer on plot during the presentations.
20 March 2018 (Shortened class period)	• Independent work time: Girls worked on stems packet.	• Independent work time: Boys worked on stems packet.
27 March 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes taught the types of	• Guided practice: Mrs. Hughes worked with the class to

	figurative language. Students took Cornell notes. • Paired work time: Students worked together to identify types of figurative language from a list of sentences.	annotate an article about cyber-bullying. Boys copied the summaries developed in the girls' class.
10 April 2018	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes reviewed five types of context clues. • Paired work time: Students worked together to identify the types of context clues for a series of examples.	• Direct instruction: Mrs. Hughes introduced the five types of context clues. • Guided practice: Students completed three questions requiring them to identify the types of context clues, and Mrs. Hughes discussed the answers with them in-depth.

Mrs. Hughes closed class each day with a clean up and exit ticket routine. After reminding students that any unfinished work was homework, she told the students how to complete their exit ticket for the day. Some days, she required students to write a sentence about what they learned that day, and other days, she asked them to tell her their main take-away as they walked out the door. Typically, students were chatting and laughing while they completed their exit tickets and packed up. Mrs. Hughes would stand by the door and remind students of her expectations: "Everyone should be in his seat! You should not be standin' up to pack! You are accountable for thirty seconds. Get it together. Clean up your area." Once the floor was clear of any trash, and students were sitting silently in their desks, she would dismiss the class by calling out specific student names or table groups. Her final words to the class on most days were the same: "Thank you for a productive day!"

Expecting different things from boys and girls.

As Table 4.2 demonstrates, Mrs. Hughes's classes rarely engaged in the same activities on the same days. Instead, the girls often completed a unit or project before the

boys started that unit or project because the boys spent significantly less time on task than the girls. Because the girls were often so far ahead of the boys, Mrs. Hughes frequently used their work to demonstrate her expectations to the boys. For example, she described some of the girls' presentations about "Three Skeleton Key" in order to explain her expectations to the boys. She also presented the completed girls' comic strips as models for the boys when they started the same project several days later.

Additionally, Mrs. Hughes used the girls' work to support the boys and help them progress through an assignment more quickly. For example, one day, Mrs. Hughes worked with the girls' class to annotate an article about cyber-bullying. She walked the girls through the article slowly and required them to write their own summary sentences for each paragraph. During this activity, Mrs. Hughes prompted the girls to consider the feelings and motivations of the people in the article and required them to make text-to-self connections. She expected the girls' class to write summaries for the entire article. When the boys completed the activity approximately one week later, Mrs. Hughes allowed the boys to copy approximately half of the summaries developed in the girls' class. She spent significantly less time guiding the boys through a close reading of the text and did not prompt them to consider the perspectives of the people in the article or connect to the text.

Although Mrs. Hughes did not directly acknowledge that the boys were often off-task, she explained that they were "behind" because they progressed at a slower pace than the girls. In spite of this claim, she spent more time giving the boys' instructions about how to comport themselves than she did the girls and asserted that this was because it was more "natural" for the girls to behave appropriately. The time that she spent

managing the boys' behavior also meant that they spent less time engaged in each activity than the girls. The boys' coverage of topics was often less in-depth and less rigorous than the girls.

Mrs. Hughes Positioning Students

Mrs. Hughes described positioning students for agency as "high priority" because she wanted them to "be change agents" who would one day be able to "work with a team to solve problems that exist in the world." She wanted her classroom to be a place "where the students are the teachers, and the teachers are facilitators." Mrs. Hughes believed in promoting student agency by setting clear expectations and holding students accountable for meeting those expectations. She believed that empowered students to become problem-solvers in her class by focusing on teaching the standards. From her perspective, she empowered students in three key ways:

- sharing "good things"
- holding students accountable
- teaching for equity.

Sharing "good things."

Mrs. Hughes demonstrated interest in her students' lives through the "good things" sharing routine. She began most class periods by sharing something that was going on in her personal life. Within the discourse of Mrs. Hughes's classroom, "good things" time was understood to be a time for audience participation and appreciation. For example, she shared a story with her students about her grandson receiving a little electric car that needed to be assembled. Her "grandbaby" was so excited about it that he wanted to put it together immediately, and Mrs. Hughes helped him. She took her time when

telling this story, sharing details, and occasionally stopping to ask questions that appeared to help students connect to the experience and seemed to invite them to share her life:

> **Mrs. Hughes:** So I will share with you a good thing. I know it's a good thing for my grandbaby. So like this past--*coughs* 'scuse me—this—all eyes should be on me. Follow me wherever I'm at. This past Saturday, my grandson received, my daughter ordered Zion a car. You know those racecars that you drive?
> **S1:** Oh! I had one of those.
> **Mrs. Hughes:** The majority of you guys had them, right?
> *Students talking excitedly, overlapping voices.*
> **Mrs. Hughes:** So, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Eyes here. Mouths closed. I'm glad that the majority of you can identify, right?
> **S1:** I rolled mine straight into a door.
> *Students talking excitedly.*
> [*Transcript abridged here for brevity*.]
> **Mrs. Hughes:** So, long story short, on yesterday, we took it back and requested a new one. Ok. So that's the good thing, but yesterday, when [my grandson] got home from school, he was so distraught. He fell out on the floor: "Where is my car?" And that was it. Alright. *Mrs. Hughes laughs and the student join her.* 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

As Mrs. Hughes told this story, the students were clearly engaged and enjoying the process. When Mrs. Hughes laughed at the end of the telling, students joined her enthusiastically.

After Mrs. Hughes finished sharing her "good thing," she would open up the floor for students to share. Students shared a wide range of things happening in their lives. For example, one student shared that her brother's girlfriend was pregnant, another that he had met his goal on the math benchmark, and a third that he had visited his grandmother's house. Mrs. Hughes was quiet and listened to each "good thing" that her students shared, and the following exchange from March 20th was typical:

> **Mrs. Hughes:** [Student name] has the floor.
> **Student 1**: Last night, I had my first baseball game.
> **Mrs. Hughes**: Cool beans. How did you do? Did you win?
> **Student 1**: We beat them 14 to 1.
> *Students whoop and clap.*

Mrs. Hughes: That means that you guys are on it. 14 to 1?
Student 1: Yeah. They gave up halfway through.
Students laugh.
Mrs. Hughes: 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. Yes?
Student 2: I got off punishment last night.
Mrs. Hughes: Wow, wonderful. That's great.

This conversation included several elements that defined teacher-student and student-student interactions in Mrs. Hughes's classroom. First, Mrs. Hughes always chose the speaker and reminded their peers to be respectful of them. Second, the student shared briefly. It was very rare for a student to share more than one or two sentences. Thirdly, Mrs. Hughes asked follow up questions to which the student responded, again briefly. Fourthly, the students in the class responded collectively, in this case to express their excitement for their peer by cheering supportively. And, finally, Mrs. Hughes used the five-to-one countdown to make sure students were quiet before calling on the next speaker.

Holding students accountable.

In our first interview, Mrs. Hughes told me that she expected all "first of all that [the students] actually learn the information on their level" and that they would score "exemplary" on the South Carolina Ready Test. She communicated her expectations to them frequently and described the language of expectation and accountability as part of the "vernacular" and "vocabulary" of her classroom. Although she occasionally used other words, such as "directions" or "requirements," Mrs. Hughes described herself as using the word "expectations" "ninety-nine percent" of the time. In keeping with her classroom "vernacular," Mrs. Hughes used two questions repeatedly and for a variety of purposes throughout her lessons: "What is the expectation?" and "What are you

accountable for doing right now?" For example, she usually asked one of these questions after explaining an assignment to ensure that students fully understood the directions.

Mrs. Hughes also used the language of expectation to hold students accountable for off-task behavior. Each time that student behavior did not meet her expectations, Mrs. Hughes held students accountable by stopping instruction and reminding the class or a specific student of her expectations. In those instances, she used a series of questions from *Capturing Kids' Hearts,* which she asked and students answered as part of a partially-scripted dialogue*:* "What are you doing right now? What are you supposed to be doing? What are you going to do? When are you going to start doing it?" As a general rule, Mrs. Hughes described in detail how she expected students, particularly in her boys' class, to position their bodies, laptops, pencils, and gazes:

> All eyes should be here on the board. All pencils should be down, all chromebooks closed, all eyes on the board, and sitting up straight. Once again, I am getting ready to count from 5 to one. Sit up straight, even if you're on the floor. Mouths closed. Chromebooks closed, pencils down on top of your chromebooks, and your eyes are on the board.

Although she communicated these expectations to her girls' classes as well, she did so less frequently and rarely included directions to "sit up straight." She explained that it was more "natural" and "ingrained" for the girls to behave that way so she did not have to remind the girls of her expectations as regularly as she reminded the boys.

In contrast to the way that she communicated her expectations regarding behavior, Mrs. Hughes gave students significant leeway when describing her expectations for their academic work. In the girls' class, she usually pointed out the main components of the assignment and then released them to work. For example, after describing the parts of a graphic organizer on character development, she helped them remember the names of the

characters in the story and then said: "So, you guys decide [on the character]. Go ahead and do that now. Let's take ten minutes. So, you decide." Here, Mrs. Hughes emphasized students' decision-making power and the amount of work time, both basic elements in her routine for giving directions. In fact, Mrs. Hughes nearly always told her students how much time they would have to complete an assigned task, leaving the rest up to them. She explained that setting time limits was one of the ways in which she helped the students to become self-regulated learners. This emphasis on creative freedom and time limits was also integral to the way that Mrs. Hughes gave directions to the boys' class. However, because the girls often completed tasks before the boys started them, Mrs. Hughes often offered examples of the girls' completed work to the boys, using them to showcase the variety of ways in which the girls had completed the assignment. In both classes, after making the basic requirements of an assignment clear, she usually responded to any student questions by saying, "However you guys want to do it, that's fine" or "It's up to you."

Teaching for equity.

Mrs. Hughes described her students as "multi-cultural" and from many "different socioeconomic status[es]," and she strongly believed in teaching for equity. To her, teaching for equity meant "leveling the playing field" for all of them. To do this, she worked to get to know her students and their experiences, and "if my students haven't had the experience, then I take it personal. And I make sure I provide the background knowledge for them." She accomplished this by "assessing their prior knowledge" and then making a "conscientious effort to frontload or give them the information that they need" before beginning a new unit. Usually, this frontloading took the form of Cornell

notes, like those the girls took on figurative language. Mrs. Hughes believed she also empowered students by taking advantage of "teachable moments" to introduce students to unfamiliar concepts through conversation or by giving an example.

Because her goal was to move all of her students "to the next level," Mrs. Hughes was familiar with her students' standardized test scores and used her knowledge of them to adjust the rate of her instruction. She explained that she did not have different expectations for different classes. Instead, she "monitor[ed] and adjust[ed]" to ensure that all students had the opportunity to "complete the assignments at the expected level." Mrs. Hughes demonstrated her commitment to allowing students to "learn the information at their rate" in several ways. First, as Table 2 shows, she allowed each class to progress at its own rate instead of trying to keep all of her classes on the same schedule. Second, she allowed students to finish classwork for homework. Thirdly, she allowed students to go into the hall to complete assessments or assignments. By allowing students to progress at their own rates while simultaneously holding them accountable for meeting expectations, Mrs. Hughes felt she was able to empower her students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The relative nature of positionality means that the teacher's position in the classroom determines the position of the students. If the teacher positions herself as the absolute authority in the room, there are few opportunities for the students to make decisions or see their actions as significant. In contrast, if the teacher positions herself as a part of a learning community, she makes space for students to experience agency. Conceptualizing teacher authority, then, becomes vital to understanding how we can create classrooms that position students for agency. I examine different models of teacher authority through the lens that Deleuze and Guattari(1987) provide via their description of root systems in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Throughout my analysis of Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Hughes and their classrooms, I noticed significant places of overlap and divergence in their pedagogical practices. Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Hughes, for example, described themselves as prioritizing student agency. They both began each class period with a warm-up activity and a time for students to share things happening in their personal lives. They also wrote lesson plans that were tightly aligned to the state standards and expected their students to produce quality work. However, there were significant differences in how Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Hughes operationalized these goals and practices. These differences resulted in classrooms that afforded significantly different opportunities for students to express and experience agency.

By taking note of the places where Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Hughes were engaged in similar activities, I became more aware of the differences in their approaches. I concluded that *how* teachers enact any given element of a lesson is largely a result of how the teacher positions herself in the classroom. In short, the decisions that each teacher made about how to embody the figured role of teacher in the classroom influenced all of her words and actions in the classroom. For example, when Mrs. Potter asked students to share out-of-school experiences, she engaged in informal, non-evaluative conversations with the student and the class. She also allowed the student speaking to choose the next volunteer to share. She used tone and management techniques during this activity to downplay her role as the authority figure and to empower her students. As a result, her students were eager to engage in dialogue with her and one another and felt comfortable managing the conversation. In contrast, when Mrs. Hughes asked students to share "good things," she was following a pre-established method for "capturing kids' hearts." Her interactions with students were generally brief and often followed the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern. She chose volunteers and regulated the conversation. Mrs. Hughes also maintained a very professional and formal tone during this time and required her students to comport themselves similarly. Her tone and management techniques highlighted her role as the authority figure in the room and positioned students as subordinate.

In Mrs. Potter's classroom, the teacher, students, and classroom environment formed a system much like the rhizome described by Delueze and Guattari (1987). Mrs. Potter viewed each of her students as "multiple" and positioned them as "becoming" scholars, writers, artists, and thinkers. She also recognized that their school and home

lives were connected and took an active interest in their interests, families, and activities outside of the classroom. Conversely, Mrs. Hughes's classroom functioned more like the Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) "world-tree." Her primary focus was the success of her students, which she measured in test scores and academic productivity. Although Mrs. Hughes did work to get to know her students, she focused on their academic abilities, test scores, and potential to contribute to society as adults.

Classrooms as Delueze-Guattarian Root Systems

Delueze and Guattari (1987) describe three types of root systems, and each root system reveals a different way that plants connect to and engage with the world around them. After describing root systems as a metaphor for understanding different types of books, they focus on the nature of the root-systems themselves and how they can be used to understand different ways of experiencing and making sense of the world. The metaphor of the book, then, becomes secondary to the examination of systems and the perspectives that they reveal and perpetuate.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe the "root-book" or the "world-tree" as the first root system (p. 5). The root-book system relies on a single root system, which results in a single tree. They describe the type of book as governed by the "law of reflection, the One that becomes two" (p. 5). The book, which is a part of the world, sets itself up as a "reflection" or imitation of the world, thereby separating itself from the world. Instead of the unity of the world, which includes the book, this type of system sets up a false dichotomy between the book and the world. In short, this system relies on a "strong principle of unity" while at the same time following the "binary logic of dichotomy" (p. 5). According to Murakami and Siegel (2018), tree-like thinking

oversimplifies reality by "reducing" and "dividing" the world into binaries that deny the "interconnectedness inherent in human and natural ecosystems" (p. 738). The tree is also "hierarchical" in nature, which limits the possibilities for connection between the parts of the tree: "In a hierarchical system, an individual has only one active neighbor, his or her hierarchical superior…The channels of transmission are preestablished" (Delueze & Guattari, 1987, p. 16).

In an "arborescent" or "world-tree" classroom, the teacher sets up a false dichotomy between herself and the learning community. She becomes the tree or the image of the world that her students are supposed to reflect of imitate. As the tree, she is rooted in "performance criteria" and acts as the singular source of authority and power in the classroom (Munday, 2012, p. 44). The world-tree represents the traditional, "banking-model" of education in which the teacher is the primary holder of knowledge[5] (Freire, 2011). Munday (2012) argues that tree-like classrooms are marked by lessons and objectives that focus on measurable objectives. In such classrooms, test grades define an individual's identity, and "autonomy" is replaced by "accountability" (Munday, 2012, p. 45). Students, then, become the "objects" of education instead of individuals in the process of "becoming"[6] (Freire, 2011). Knowledge flows in predetermined "channels of transmission," from the teacher to the student. Possibilities for connectedness between students are limited because the teacher is their primary "active neighbor." Conversation in the aborescent classroom typically follow the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern in which the teacher initiates an interaction by asking a question, choosing a

[5] As post-structuralists, Delueze and Guattari (1987) would likely find Freire's (2011) work too limiting. However, the open and flexible nature of post-structural thought also creates a space where different schools of thought can connect, mesh, and work together as a rhizome.
[6] Freire (2011) and Delueze and Guattari (1987) both use the word "becoming" to describe the process of identity development and growth.

student to respond, and then providing feedback on the students' answer. There are no "smooth" spaces where students may shoot out their own roots.

The second type of root system is a "radicle-system, or fascicular root" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 5). Here, the "principle root has aborted, or it's tip has been destroyed," and a "multiplicity of secondary roots graft onto it" (p. 5). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assert that the fragmented nature of modernity make the fascicular root book the natural reflection of the modern world. However, they argue that this type of system "does not really break with dualism" because while the "world has become chaos, […] the book remains the image of the world" (p. 6). The tree's root system is damaged or destroyed, and the book reflects the damage. In the classroom, the teacher remains the tree, and the students' role remains imitation. However, the damaged nature of the tree's root system changes the classroom dynamic, allowing students to "graft on" to the tree. The fascicular system, then, describes a classroom where the teachers' use of authority is not effective. Because the teacher's authority is "aborted" or "destroyed," students "graft on" to the authority of the teacher in way that creates "chaos" (p. 6). However, according to Munday, (2012) fascicular classrooms may or may not appear chaotic. In some cases, the "subject" (or teacher) can gain "control over the world by structuring and representing it as chaotic" (p. 46). Such a representation enables the teacher to justify a more authoritarian approach to classroom management.

The third type of root system is the rhizome. Unlike trees, rhizomes are horizontal root systems with multiple nodes, shoots, and points of connection. Bermuda grass is a rhizome. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the rhizome represents a fundamental break from the first two root systems because instead of being a "unity" and

a reflection of that unity, it is "multiple" (p. 6). In their initial and summary definition of the rhizome they argue that while the rhizome exists in nature:

> " (the) *multiple must be made,* not always by adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of dimension one already has available—always *n*-1 (the only way the one belongs to the multiple, always subtracted). Subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted; write at *n*-1 dimensions." (p. 6).

By considering the classroom as a rhizome, we can come to a different conceptualization of teacher authority. In order to create an interconnected, non-hierarchical classroom community, the teacher must "subtract the unique" position of teacher-as-sole-authority from *n,* the number of possible identities in the classroom. This allows the teacher to "blend" with the "learning community" and remain open to learning from the students (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016, p. 89). By inviting students to share their experiences and knowledge, the teacher acknowledges that the classroom is not "sealed" from the world and "what happens in the classroom cannot be divorced or separated from like as it is lived outside the classroom" (Munday, 2012, p. 56). In these ways, a rhizomatic pedagogy empowers students and creates limitless outlets for student agency.

The rhizome, however, is more complex than the *n*-1 formula suggests, and Deleuze and Guattari go on to describe it using a series of six principles. Each of these principles can help us re-think how classrooms work in general and how teacher authority operates in particular. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) link principles 1 and 2, the principles of "connection and heterogeneity" (p. 7). They argue, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (p. 7). Every part of the rhizome connects to or has the potential to connect to any other point; there are no predetermined paths or hierarchies. Principle 3 is "multiplicity," which Deleuze and Guattari describe as an

"assemblage" with "no points or positions" (p. 8). In this "assemblage," there are "only lines" and connections which form a "*plane of consistency"* (p. 9). The fourth principle is the "principle of asignifying rupture" (p. 9). Rhizomes can be "broken, shattered at a given spot," but nevertheless, the rhizome itself remains complete. The breaks create new "lines of flight" which always "tie back to one another" (p. 9). The final two principles are also linked; principles 5 and 6 are the principles of "cartography and decalcomania" (p. 12). The rhizome is like a "map" and not a "tracing" because it "is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real" (p. 12). Rhizomes do not merely "trace" paths that already exist as an artist does when practicing the art of decalcomania. Instead, rhizomes make connections as a cartographer does, between the landscape and the paper and between the world and his perception of it. The rhizome, like a map is "open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification" (p. 12). The flexibility, mutability, and inclusivity of maps reflect the openness of the rhizome. The rhizome has "multiple entryways" and can incorporate the "tracing" as a part of itself, just as the rhizome can connect to other systems (p. 13).

Arborescent Classroom

Trees can be characterized by their appearance and growth patterns. Trees comprise a single, woody trunk that splits into branches at the top and is anchored by roots at the bottom. Although the roots or branches of one tree might come into contact with the roots or branches of other plants/trees, that contact does not constitute a connection between the two life-systems. Gorodetsky and Barak (2016) describe tree growth as a "hierarchical model that dictates order in the sequence of growth (leaves

cannot precede roots) and the positions of the different parts (leaves or branches) are predetermined" (p. 87). Trees grow through bifurcation. A single root or branch divides into progressively smaller and smaller roots or branches as the tree develops. Similarly, the arborescent classroom is marked by a singular focus/authority and a community structured by binaries and hierarchies. Often, this focus is on standardized test scores.

In the arborescent classroom, the teacher is the primary subject. She is the tree whose roots anchor the classroom, and as such, her focus structures the community. And, as Murakami and Siegel (2018) argue, if her focus is on standardized testing, her thinking is more likely to be tree-like because the "phenomenon of high-stakes standardized assessments is an example of structural oversimplification" or tree-like thinking (p. 738). Mrs. Hughes's was the center of her classroom, and her rootedness/focus on student success structured her lesson plans as well as interactions with students.

The tree trunk, establishing uniqueness.

Because classrooms are figured worlds, the physical organization of learning spaces can convey clear and powerful messages about authority. The teacher's podium is a clear marker of power, and the person standing behind it embodies the role of "the lecturer" or dispenser of knowledge (Bone & Edwards, 2015, p. 65). Similarly, the chair behind the teacher's desk represents her authority and functions much like a throne in a medieval mead hall. Mrs. Hughes gravitated to these two locations in her classroom and spent most of her time either seated behind her desk or standing behind the podium. She projected her voice forcefully from these places when she was addressing the class and required students to be silent before she would speak.

Mrs. Hughes also employed other techniques to convey her authority in the classroom. For example, she frequently exerted her control over hers students' physical bodies by requiring them to sit up straight and look at the speaker. She also asked students to do small, inconsequential tasks for her, such as picking up pieces of paper on the floor. By establishing herself as the sole authority figure in the room, Mrs. Hughes's emphasized her "uniqueness" and bifurcated the learning community into the teacher-student binary.

Mrs. Hughes's also presented herself as the primary dispenser of knowledge in her classroom. Although there were occasional exceptions, most of her interactions with students followed the traditional IRF pattern. When initiating this the IRF pattern, Mrs. Hughes asked a "closed" question, i.e. a question to which there was only one correct answer. During the bell-work/test-preparation routine, these answers were generally given as the letter corresponding to the correct answer to a multiple-choice question. On the occasions when Mrs. Hughes asked more open-ended questions or questions that required students to interpret the text, she continued questioning students until they arrived at the answer that she was seeking. By establishing herself as the primary holder of knowledge, Mrs Hughes was repeatedly reinforcing the division between herself and her students and limiting students' opportunities to share their knowledge and lived experiences. Gorodetsky and Barak (2016) assert that this "artificial division between teaching vs. learning […] diminishes the role of teachers as continuously growing and transforms them into being mere technocrats of content transmitters" (p. 97). If we envision the tree-like classroom as a forest, Mrs. Hughes could be represented as a tree, and like a tree, she was singular and disconnected from the other growth in the forest.

Although she shared a space with them, she was a closed system that did not receive knowledge/nourishment from her students.

The roots and branches, teaching and learning for standardized assessments.

Learning was also structured and hierarchical in Mrs. Hughes classroom, and everything from the appearance of her room to her lesson plans metaphorically sprang from her roots in the South Carolina Ready Test. The posters in her room described academic processes or terms, and all of the furniture was standard issue from the school. There were very few personal or artistic objects in the room. By including only professional/academic décor, Mrs. Hughes conveyed the message that her classroom was a closed system, disconnected from the external world.

Mrs. Hughes's focus on standardized tests also influenced her lesson plans. She expressed her goals for herself and her students in terms of testing levels. She wanted to move all of her students to the "next level," and she expected all of them to score "exemplary" on the South Carolina Ready Test. Mrs. Hughes's lesson planning and her instructional style reflected her focus on success and revealed that she believed that she enabling her students to be successful by emphasizing discipline and productivity. She used the standards that would be tested to create extensive, sequential lesson plans. Like a tree, these lesson plans outlined a particular growth pattern, which she expected students to follow. Because the outcomes were pre-determined, she shared her objectives with students by asking them to read the standards that they were about to cover. Her focus on standards-based objectives coupled with her habit of asking questions to which she already knew the answer resulted in type of "teacher discourse that supports certainty" (Bone & Edwards, 2015, p. 60). This type of discourse leaves little room for

genuine discovery, spontaneity, or surprise, and as Holland et al. (1998) point out, discourses of power and privilege determine which cultural resources are available to individuals as they seek to "improvise" their identities (p. 5). A highly structured discourse of "certainty" limits the possibilities for students to improvise and therefore leaves little room for them to experience agency.

Rhizomatic Classroom

In botany, the rhizome is simply defined as a horizontal root system in which a single plant stem can quickly multiply itself by sending out roots in all directions. These roots gather in nodes and send up new shoots, and the process repeats itself. While this definition alone could be used to describe Mrs. Potter's classroom, the more complex examination of the nature of rhizomes that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the rhizome (and the rhizomatic classroom) functions. In addition to the traditional botanical conceptualization of a rhizome, which includes "bulbs and tubers," Deleuze and Guattari argue that "some animals are, in their pack from […] burrows are too, in all their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout" (p. 6-7). A rhizome then, is an open, flexible, and robust system that connects life and matter as well as their functions in a meaningful, self-perpetuating web. If we think of a classroom in these terms, we can see how the idea of rhizomatic classroom disrupts the traditional classroom model, which is a closed model in which the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and authority. The rhizomatic classroom reveals the interconnectedness of the classroom, the teacher, the students, the curriculum, the school, and the community. In this web, the teacher is not unique but is instead one "bulb" in the rhizome. Such a model empowers students by eliminating hierarchy and

positioning teacher and students on the same horizontal plane, with the same possibilities for function. In short, the rhizomatic classroom represents the possibility of limitless opportunities for students to experience agency.

In Mrs. Potter's classroom, the teacher, students, and classroom environment formed a system much like the rhizome described by Delueze and Guattari (1987). She also recognized that their school and home lives were connected and took an active interest in their interests, families, and activities outside of the classroom. Mrs. Potter viewed each of her students as "multiple" and positioned them as scholars, writers, artists, and thinkers, and planned lessons which allowed students to experience themselves in these positions. She also connected to each student (and helped them connect to one another) in numerous ways each day, thereby creating so many connections within the classroom that singular "ruptures" in those connections were essentially meaningless and did not damage the rhizome. Finally, she worked to make sure that students had authentic opportunities to connect their learning to the world and to shape the curriculum. Like a rhizome, these practices were non-hierarchical and connected, and just as the rhizome is full of redundancies, there was overlap between the Delueze-Guattarian principles that describe the rhizome. Each classroom activity, then, can be categorized in multiple ways and can serve multiple functions in the rhizomatic classroom.

1 and 2, the principles of connection and heterogeneity.

Mrs. Potter's classroom exemplifies the principles of "connection and heterogeneity" in three particularly powerful ways. First, Mrs. Potter used art, furniture, and other decor to make her classroom feel like a home. In this way, she conveyed the

message to her students that her classroom was not a closed system, disconnected from the outside world. Instead, it was a place where they were welcome to share their whole identities. Although her classroom also included the standard institutional furniture and the traditional trappings of teacher authority such as a podium, Mrs. Potter rarely used them. Instead, she invited students to stand behind the podium when they presented, symbolically conferring its authority upon them. In contrast, she sat in or on student desks, positioning herself as a part of the community.

In addition to the ways in she used the physical environment to create a heterogeneous community, Mrs. Potter encouraged her students to understand knowledge itself as rhizomatic. Although she wrote lesson plans that were connected to the standards, she allowed the students, their interests, and their affective responses to shape those plans. For example, she set aside two instructional days to prepare for and host the Poetry Café because her students expressed their desire to share their poetry with their classmates. She also built in time for students to engage in dialogue by regularly asking students to work together to explore open-ended questions. Mrs. Potter frequently expressed how much she enjoyed learning from her students during these conversations, and instead of creating a discourse of teacher "certainty," she created space for surprise and genuine exploration (Bone & Edwards, 2015, p. 60). These practices, and her habit of listening to engaging with students in an unscripted, informal way, conveyed the message that their voices, ideas, and understandings were valuable and important. In turn, the way that she valued their responses strengthened her relationships/connections to her students and gave them the space to create their own connections with one another.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, every person/bulb in the classroom, including Mrs. Potter, was plugged in to the rhizome of the classroom community. Mrs. Potter fostered the connections between bulbs by planning lessons and assignments that gave students frequent opportunities to share their experiences, opinions, ideas, and art. For example, her daily bell-work routine allowed students the chance to write and share their writing. The act of sharing their writing regularly was, in and of itself, a powerful way to build connections between individuals. However, Mrs. Potter also strengthened the connections between students by allowing each speaker to pick the next volunteer. By "subtracting" herself from the process, she did three things. First, she allowed students to connect directly to one another. Second, Mrs. Potter made the classroom community more homogenous in terms of power, and thirdly, she opened up a space for students to make new connections to one another and share the responsibility for regulating their own behavior and conversations. Mrs. Potter also "subtracted" herself in this way when she turned to class over to students during Socratic Seminars.

3, the principle of multiplicity.

Delueze and Guattari (1987) describe a multiplicity or an "assemblage" as having "neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature" (p. 8). Unlike a tree, which remains essentially the same even as it grows more leaves and branches, the rhizome is fundamentally changed as it grows. It is generative, and each nexus can make its own connections and send up its own shoots. When a new nexus or "bulb" forms, the rhizome or assemblage changes fundamentally; suddenly, there are new possibilities for connection. The boundaries have shifted. Multiplicities are also "flat" in the sense that

they "fill or occupy all of their dimensions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). There is not overarching unity in a higher dimension that controls or "overcodes" the rhizome. Instead, each part of the rhizome is equally powerful and equally a part of the organism. Delueze and Guattari (1987) argue that the "ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane […] on a single page, the same sheet" (p. 9).

In many ways, all classrooms have some of the characteristics of multiplicity. Classroom dynamics, for example, change when new students are added. However, not all classrooms are "flat" in the way that Delueze and Guattari (1987) describe. Instead, the average classroom has the additional dimension of teacher authority that "overcodes" the classroom community. Although this additional dimension was not completely absent in Mrs. Potter's classroom, she used her authority to "flatten" the classroom as much as possible, thereby allowing students to experience themselves in new ways—as parts of an egalitarian community, as able to generate new connections, and as connected to everything around them.

4, the principle of asignifying rupture.

A tree whose root system or trunk has been destroyed cannot rebound, but unlike trees, rhizomes are incredibly resilient. Because a rhizome is multiple, heterogeneous, and connected, damage to any part of the rhizome does not result in the destruction of the whole: "you can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed" (Delueze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Instead, the other connections remain intact and create new "lines of flight." Each node/bulb in the rhizome is connected to several other nodes/bulbs, which all exist in a mutually supportive network. The connections between bulbs/people are like the tough

root strands of Bermuda grass. Even if one of the connections is damaged, the rhizome remains healthy.

The principle of asignifying rupture, then, means that rhizomes are robust and resilient. Like a rhizome, the bonds that formed the community in Mrs. Potter's classroom were numerous and web-like. This network of connections between students and one another and between Mrs. Potter and her students meant that their community was resilient. On the rare occasions that Mrs. Potter used her authority in traditional ways to stop student misbehavior, the atmosphere of the class remained stable. For example, when she asked a student to write his name on the board, she might have been severing one of the "roots" connecting them, but that student remained connected to the whole community. These remaining connections, in turn, provided support that allowed the student to "re-grow" his connection to Mrs. Potter more quickly. Instead of the situation escalating or the student disengaging for the remainder of the class period, Mrs. Potter's connection to him helped him to remain calm and begin participating.

5 and 6, cartography and decalcomania.

Delueze and Guattari (1987) admonish their readers to "Make a map, not a tracing" because the map "has to do with performance whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'" (p. 12-13). Maps, then, focus on the process and the act of creation. Making a map means being attentive to the world, and the ways in which it is constantly changing. Maps teach us to make new connections. In contrast, the tracing only "reproduces" and "organizes" certain parts of the map, the "impasses, blockages, incipient taproots, or points of structuration" (p. 13). Tracings are stable,

restrictive, and closed. They do not allow for new lines of flight, desires, or ways of thinking.

The rhizomatic classroom is like a map and not a tracing because it allows students to participate in inquiry and exercise their creativity instead of requiring students to reproduce the knowledge provided by the teacher. In Mrs. Potter's classroom, students regularly generated their own discussion questions and engaged in creative writing. She chose assignments, such as the dialectical journal, that required students to make unique connections between their learning and their lived experiences as well as assignments, such as the Poetry Café, that encouraged them to explore writing as an art and a process. Instead of organizing her curriculum according to the standards and requiring students to reproduce the knowledge most likely to be tested, Mrs. Potter encouraged students to generate new knowledge and make new connections.

Implications for Teaching

As teachers, we can reshape our practices and transform our classroom communities by re-thinking our beliefs and practices through arboreal, fascicular, and rhizomatic lenses. More specifically, we can use these lenses to reflect on our beliefs about teacher authority and to become more attentive to the ways in which we use our authority. However, felling our trees and building new systems is a process. We must learning to ask different types of questions and develop new habits. Fortunately, as rhizomes remind us, we can begin at any point and grow in multiple directions simultaneously. Throughout the process, however, we must be careful to remember that this model, like all models, tends toward the dualism of tree-like thinking. Therefore, we must remain open to surprises, new lines of flight, and new connections.

Thinking through the Rhizome

The six principles of the rhizome that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) outline can help us generate new questions to ask ourselves as we reflect on our practice. This list is not comprehensive. Instead, these questions should be considered as a rhizome, which means we can enter at any point and create new lines of flight in any direction.

Questions concerning connection and heterogeneity.

The principles of connection and heterogeneity remind us that our classrooms should be egalitarian communities, places where we value all voices, and safe harbors for our students.

- How do I "subtract" my unique authority as the teacher?
- How do I communicate to students the fact that I value all of their voices and ways of knowing?
- How do I empower students to facilitate their own conversations and learning?
- How do I create opportunities for students to get to know one another (and me) and authentic ways?
- How do I strengthen the bonds of community in my classroom?
- How do I show students that my classroom is an "open" system? In other words, how do I convey to them that they can and should make connections between school and the rest of their lives?

Questions concerning multiplicity.

The principle of multiplicity asks us to consider identity in new ways. Instead of thinking of identity as a single, unified subject, Delueze and Guattari (1987) argue that we should consider identity as multiple and always in the process of "becoming."

- How do I honor all of my students as multiple? In other words, how do I position them so that they can experience themselves as writers, artists, scholars, poets, etc.?
- How do I create a space where students can freely make connections between all aspects of their lives?
- How do I give my students the freedom to grow and change?

Questions concerning asignifying rupture.

The principle of asignifying rupture reminds us that rhizomes are not easily broken; their multiple nodes and root strands make them robust and irrepressible.

- How do I foster relationships in my classroom?
- How regularly do I engage in activities that allow me to bond with my students?
- How do my classroom management strategies affect my connections with my students?

Questions concerning cartography and decalcomania.

As teachers, we are uniquely positioned to shape our students' beliefs about knowledge and learning. If we treat knowledge as a stable thing that can be transferred from one knower to another, we encourage them to engage in "tracing." In contrast, if we allow them to make their own discoveries and connections, we are teaching them to make their own "maps."

- How do I promote inquiry learning in my classroom?
- How do I encourage students to be open-minded and make new connections?
- How do my classroom practices and lesson plans encourage students to see learning as a process of discovery rather than the practicing of "competencies"?

Becoming the Rhizome

In addition to reflecting on our teaching, we can begin to engage in the process of making our classrooms more rhizomatic by taking action. One of the most important ways that we can do this is to actively position ourselves as a part of the rhizome instead as the world-tree. Teacher authority and the embodiment of this authority can take many forms, and therefore, it is impossible to delineate all of the things that teachers can do to create a rhizomatic classroom. However, there are several actions that we can take daily in order to promote student agency. First, we can make changes in the physical environment of our classrooms to create bridges to the outside world. By bringing in personal décor and residential furniture, we can convey the message to our students that our classroom is an open system and that their out-of-school experiences are welcome. Second, as teachers, we can pay attention to the ways in which we position our bodies within the classroom space. Instead of standing or sitting behind traditional symbols of teacher authority, we can choose to sit or stand with students to convey the message that we are a part of the learning community.

Finally, we can pay close attention to our language and use it position ourselves as co-learners in the classroom, thereby empowering students to share their knowledge and take learning risks. For example, by avoiding IRF and closed questions, we can promote dialogue and limit the perception that we are the primary holders of knowledge in the classroom. We can also validate student knowledge by explicitly telling students when we learn something new from them. Creating a discourse of in which "not-knowing" is not only acceptable but normal also frees students to explore new ideas.

Limitations

This is a qualitative study and as such results are not generalizable. As Altheide (1987) asserts, in qualitative research, the "investigator is continually central" (p. 68). Therefore, my perspectives, interests, and experiences shaped my observations and interpretations. Another individual might have noticed different details in the classroom or focused on different portions of the transcripts. I also recognize that subjectivities and cultural contexts shift, and therefore, my data might be interpreted differently in the future.

The findings and interpretations of this study are also limited by the identities of the teachers with whom I worked. They came from different sociocultural backgrounds and conceptualized the role of the teacher in the classroom very differently from one another.

Directions for Future Research

This study describes my initial observations and analysis as I focused on the two primary questions that guided my study:

1) How do English Language Arts teachers use language and other cues to position middle-level students as agents within the context of the single-gender classroom?
2) How, if at all, do teacher practices and teacher language vary based on the student or group of students with whom they are interacting?

My findings suggest that the way that these teachers conceptualized and exercised authority impacted the nature of the communities in their classrooms as well as the opportunities to experience agency available to their students. However, I did not engage

directly with students, nor did I analyze any student data related to performance. Future research should seek to include student perspectives and explore the ways in which different root types of classrooms influence student learning. Additionally, future research should be conducted across different grade levels and in mixed gender classrooms.

Other possibilities for future research could include action research projects in which teachers reflect on their beliefs and practices through Delueze-Guattarian lenses. For example, teachers could ask themselves questions like those included here and journal their answers over the course of a semester or year. Teachers could also incorporate rhizomatic practices and reflect on the ways in which those practices impact their classroom communities. There is also a need to identify more questions and practices that might be used to foster rhizomatic teaching.

My Perspective as a Researcher

This project was comprised of many firsts for me. It was the first time that I designed a project without any assigned parameters. It was my first experience in recruiting participants who were strangers to me. And, it was longest and most in-depth study I have every conducted, and the first time that I was free to analyze my data through any lens I chose. Figuring out each of these firsts was a learning process, and I am proud of all that I learned and the ways in which I have grown as a scholar. However, the process has made me acutely aware of the challenges that I will continue to face as a researcher.

One of the first things that I learned was that my initial research design was too involved for the busy teachers with whom I wanted to work. I had to change the

parameters to persuade them to participate, and in the future, I would like to develop my research protocols more collaboratively from the outset. Also, knowing that the teachers were beginning their work with me with some reservations made me nervous. What if one of them decided to opt out? Would I have to start over? How should I negotiate my relationships with them?

My research was also complicated because I was working with two teachers who could not have been more different from one another. Mrs. Hughes was an African American woman in her late 40's who grew up in South Carolina and has never lived outside of the state. She dressed primarily in black business attire accented with chunky jewelry. She saw herself as a professional educator and maintained a firm demeanor in the classroom. Mrs. Hughes rarely acknowledged me when I entered the classroom—unless the chair where I normally sat was missing. On those days, she directed a student to move a chair for me. She called me "Mrs. Stowe," and always maintained a formal demeanor during our conversations. I found her intimidating and often felt nervous when I was asking her interview questions. Mrs. Potter was a Caucasian American woman in her late 20's. She grew up in New York State but moved to South Carolina to teach. She wore trendy clothes, had both nostrils pierced, and wore large, black plugs in her ears instead of earrings. She saw herself as fun and bubbly and enjoyed being close in age to her students. Mrs. Potter greeted me with a huge smile and a little wave each time I slipped into the back of her classroom. She called me by my first name and treated me like an old friend. I felt very comfortable interacting with her.

I started working with Mrs. Hughes first, and the differences in our personalities and cultural backgrounds made it difficult for me to "find my feet" with her (Geertz,

1973, p. 13). These differences meant that I had a "lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which her acts were signs" (Geertz, 1973, p. 13). I had difficulty reconciling what I saw with her description of it. Although the feeling of "unfamiliarity" was uncomfortable and often caused me to question my interpretation of events, our differences in perspective proved to be invaluable to my growth as a researcher. If Mrs. Hughes and I had understood the events in her classroom in the same way, it's unlikely that I would have questioned my interpretations of the events or noticed that I was conflating observation and interpretation. However, when I asked Mrs. Hughes questions about how she was feeling or what she was thinking about during certain moments, her answers revealed that the way I was asking the questions contained assumptions. For example, during one of our early interviews, I asked about a moment when she "seemed upset," and Mrs. Hughes asserted that she had not been upset at all during that class period. Although I learned to ask questions more carefully, Mrs. Hughes consistently and assertively challenged me when I did reveal my interpretations of the events occurring in her classroom. I had difficulty reconciling what I believed I was seeing in her classroom with the ways in which she described her teaching.

As Geertz (1973) points out, the process of observation can never be completely disentangled from the process of interpretation. Therefore, as much as I tried to be an objective observer throughout this process, my observations were unavoidably subjective, and my early field notes reveal seeing and interpreting as nearly simultaneous processes. Fortunately for me, my work with Mrs. Hughes had taught me to be more careful about the ways in which I took notes, asked questions, and drew conclusions. The lessons that I learned with Mrs. Hughes proved to be invaluable, particularly because Mrs. Potter

presented an entirely different challenge--our perspectives on teaching and classroom management styles were very similar, so everything seemed very familiar. Instead of seeing everything differently, we often interpreted things in the same way; therefore, I worked to be intentional about separating my observations from my interpretations and tried not to make assumptions about the motivations behind Mrs. Potter's actions in the classroom.

Once I had gathered, transcribed, and coded all of my data, I was faced with the problem of interpretation. How could I organize what I had learned in a way that made sense? As I considered my data, I kept returning to the idea that the way a teacher positions him/herself in terms of the traditional authority structure of the classroom was one of the core things influencing students' opportunities for agency. My challenge, then, was to create or find a conceptual model that could explain the divergent ways in which these two teachers used their authority in the classroom and the ways in which their positioning of themselves was simultaneously a positioning of their students. As I considered Mrs. Potter's classroom, my mind kept returning to the word "diffuse" and images of interconnected neurons or root systems. Once I was able to articulate what I was saying in those terms, I began thinking of Delueze and Guattari's (1987) work on rhizomes. I hadn't read the text in several years and was left with only a vague memory of its contents, so I decided to reread it.

As I reread the text, two things stuck me. First, the chapter was not only about rhizomes, but about other types of root systems, too. As I read, I imagined how each of these systems might look in a classroom and realized that their work could provide a conceptual framework for thinking about authority in several different types of

classrooms, including Mrs. Hughes's and Mrs. Potter's. Deleuze and Guattari (1987), of course, were not writing about classrooms or agency, but their work provides a way of understanding the dynamics of these two classrooms. There are certainly other ways of understanding them. For example, because one teacher was African American and the other was European American, I could have chosen to analyze the differences between their teaching styles based on theories related to racial dynamics in the classroom.

However, because my focus was on the ways in which teachers positioned students for agency in their classrooms, a lens that could be used to examine power in the simplest of terms seemed the most useful to me. Additionally Delueze and Guattari (1987) seem to privilege rhizomes over the other types of root systems as the most flexible, resilient, and realistic model for understanding the world. Their work does not directly privilege one type of classroom over another or indicate how one type might be more conducive to student empowerment than another. However, my understanding of agency and the relative nature of positioning led me to conclude that the rhizomatic classroom was more likely to be a place where students could experience agency because rhizomatic classrooms allow students to share the power normally reserved for the teacher in ways that more traditional, arborescent models do not. This inferential leap lead me to consider the ways in which we can make use of the rhizome model to rethink our teaching practices.

Conclusion

Mrs. Hughes's tree-like classroom revealed the ways in which a highly structured, hierarchical, and "closed" classroom limited her students' opportunities to experience agency. She positioned herself as separate from the learning community, thereby

implying that she was open to learning from her students. Through a Freirian (2011) lens, such an approach can be seen as positioning students as "objects" not "subjects" in the classroom. Mrs. Hughes also focused on preparing students to be successful according to the performance criteria for the South Carolina Ready test. Her lesson planning and instructional style reflected her focus on success and revealed that she believed that she enabling her students to be successful by emphasizing discipline and productivity. In many ways, this singular focus positioned her students as "target grades" instead of allowing them to explore themselves as "multiple" and therefore capable of enacting a multitude of identities. This tree-like approach to authority also limited the opportunities that her students had to experience agency.

In Mrs. Potter's classroom, the teacher, students, and classroom environment form a system much like the rhizome described by Delueze and Guattari (1987). Mrs. Potter viewed each of her students as "multiple" and positions them as scholars, writers, artists, and thinkers. She also recognized that their school and home lives are connected and takes an active interest in their interests, families, and activities outside of the classroom. Relationships were personal and informal. She cultivated relationships with and between her students by valuing their voices and experiences as well as by having high expectations for them. Mrs. Potter encouraged students to share their interests, thoughts, and opinions with the entire class. She also encouraged students to engage with one another by planning lessons that prioritized students' voices.

By considering our beliefs and classroom practices through the lenses provided by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we can begin to ask different kinds of questions and act in different ways. Although this study is not generalizable, making connections between

Deleuze-Guattarian root systems and the classroom is a fruitful way to think about education and opens up multiple possibilities for research.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for the Pre-visit Interview

1. Please describe how you see your role in the classroom.
    a. Can you give me an example of how you embody this role?
2. Who or what has influenced the way you think of yourself in the classroom? How?
    a. Why do you think X has had this influence on you?
3. Please describe how you see the role of students your classroom.
4. What do you expect from your students?
    a. Do you have different expectations for different classes? If so, please describe and explain those differences.
    b. Do you have different expectations for individual students? If so, please describe and explain those differences.
5. How do you communicate your expectations to your students?
6. Think back to when you were in school. Please describe how your teachers, if any, influenced the way you see yourself as a person.
7. How do you want your students to see themselves?
8. What practices do you use to help your students to see themselves this way?
9. How would you define the concept of agency?
10. How do you position your students as agents in your classroom?

    a. Can you give a specific example of a time when you positioned a student or a class for agency?

11. How important is it that students feel a sense of agency in the classroom? Why?
12. Please describe what teaching for equity means to you.
13. Please describe your goals for yourself as a teacher.
14. Please describe what you hope to get out of participating in this study.

Questions for Final Interview

1. Please describe how you see your role in the classroom.
    a. Can you give me an example of how you embody this role?
2. How has the way that you view your role changed over the course of this study?
3. Please describe how you see the role of students your classroom.
4. How has the way that you view your students' roles changed over the course of this study?
5. What do you expect from your students?
    a. Do you have different expectations for different classes? If so, please describe and explain those differences.
    b. Do you have different expectations for individual students? If so, please describe and explain those differences.
6. How, if at all, has your participation in this study changed your expectations of your students?
7. How, if at all, has your participation in this study changed the way you perceive your expectations of your students?
8. How do you communicate your expectations to your students?

9. How, if at all, has your participation in this study changed the way you communicate your expectations of your students?
10. How do you want your students to see themselves?
11. How, if at all, has participation in this study changed the way that you want your students to see themselves?
12. What practices do you use to help your students to see themselves this way?
13. How, if at all, has participation in this study changed the practices that you use to help students see themselves in this way?
14. How would you define the concept of agency?
15. How, if at all, has participation in this study changed the way that you conceptualize agency?
16. How do you position your students as agents in your classroom?
    a. Can you give a specific example of a time when you positioned a student or a class for agency?
17. How important is it that students feel a sense of agency in the classroom? Why?
18. How, if at all, has participation in this study changed the way that you think about the importance of student agency in the classroom?
19. Please describe what teaching for equity means to you.
20. How, if at all, has participation in this study this changed the way that you think about teaching for equity?

APPENDIX B

LETTERS OF INFORMED CONSENT

Letter of Informed Consent for Teachers

Dear fellow educator,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a University of South Carolina research project on the ways that teachers promote agency in the classroom. This project will be conducted at TWO Academies over the next several months. I am interested in identifying the language and other cues that teachers use to encourage students to see themselves as capable learners who have control over their own learning. For example, I will be looking for ways that teachers send the message that their students are capable. In this classroom, this might sound like a teacher talking about his/her students as "readers" or "writers" because this implies that they have what it takes to read and write. Additionally, I will look for indications of trust in students' abilities, such as choosing to assign challenging work or activities. I will also look for evidence of the degree of control over and responsibility for learning that teachers give to students. The secondary goal of this study is to identify any potential differences in the way that teachers promote agency among different groups of students (males vs. females, etc).

If you choose to participate, data collection will occur throughout the Spring semester. First, I would like to conduct a pre-visit and interview you. The pre-visit will allow me to take detailed field notes on the classroom environment, so that I can focus on your interactions with your students when I begin my observations. The interview will

allow me to get to know you and to gain an understanding of how you conceptualize student agency and how you believe you foster student agency in their classrooms. The interview will also include question about your goals for yourself as they relate to the use of talk in the classroom so that I can focus my observations so as to be useful to you as well as meeting the goals of this study. I would like to record this interview Teacher using a digital voice recorder and by taking field notes.

Following the pre-visit and interview, I will begin collecting data by observing, recording, and taking field notes in your classroom twice a week. During each visit, I will observe at least one all-female class and one all-male class or two classes of different academic levels. I will also collect any lesson plans for the classes that I observe. Each week, I will conduct a follow-up with you using a double-column data collection sheet. The first column will consist of field notes and verbatim transcriptions of salient moments from each class period. The second column will consist of prompts asking the you to reflect his/her thinking at particular points during the class, e.g. "Help me understand your thinking here" or "Why did you choose to say X at this moment?"

Finally, I will interview you after completing all other data collection so that we can talk about how your beliefs and teaching might have changed as a result of reflecting on your practice. (Appendix A). Table 1 shows an estimated timetable, but all dates are contingent upon district approval. Using multiple sources of evidence and building in member-checks for each teacher will also serve to increase the validity of the study.

I understand that this project will require additional work on your part; however, I want to make the process as rewarding as possible for you. Each interview will take approximately one to two hours, for a maximum total of four hours, and can be scheduled

at your convenience. The weekly completion of the double-column data collection sheet will take approximately one to two hours per week, but we will not need to meet to talk about them. In other words, you can spend that time reflecting on your teaching whenever and wherever is most convenient for you, and you can email me your response. Finally, I will not ask you to create any additional lesson plans. Whatever documents you already use to support your teaching will suffice.

As a pre-requisite to being allowed to conduct research at Dent Middle School, I have agreed to provide the district with a copy of my completed research. However, since my goal is to describe the ways that you promote agency within your classroom, I will, essentially be recording evidence of you engaging in best practices. Additionally, even if I identify patterns in the way that you promote agency among your students, your participation in this project indicates your desire to grow professionally and to learn more about yourself as a teacher. Unless you give me additional verbal or written permission, I will not share your words or actions in conjunction with specific personal identifiers. In other words, I will refer only to scenarios not to specific classrooms. Therefore, I do not anticipate any professional risk as a result of your participation. In short, I will treat your identity as confidential in my dissertation and any publications. Finally, all children's identities will be considered confidential and individual children's words or actions will not be shared with identifying information. I will only make notes and write about children with parental permission, and who themselves agree to participate. Finally, your, students, or parents may withdraw their permission at any time during the study without penalty by indicating this decision to the researcher.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Carolina. In addition, it has the support of your principal. However, the final decision about the participation is yours. If you have any questions about the study, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please feel free to contact me at jstowe@email.sc.edu or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Stephens at stephens.diane@gmail.com**.** Thank you in advance for your interest in and support of this project.

Sincerely,

Jennifer V. Stowe

PhD Candidate, Language and Literacy

Department of Instruction and Teacher Education

University of South Carolina

Information Letter and Consent Form for Parents or Guardians

Permission for Research with Children

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s):

I am writing to ask your permission for your child to participate in a University of South Carolina research project on the ways that teachers promote agency in the classroom. This project is entitled *Fostering Agency in Single-Gender, Middle Level ELA Classrooms: A Descriptive Multiple-Case Study* and will be conducted at TWO Academies over the next several months. I am interested in identifying the language and other cues that teachers use to encourage students to see themselves as capable learners who have control over their own learning. Your child's teacher has agreed to participate in this study, and the focus of the study will be on him/her. For example, I will be looking for ways that he/she sends the message that his/her students are capable. In this classroom, this might sound like a teacher talking about his/her students as "readers" or "writers" because this implies that they have what it takes to read and write. Additionally, I will look for things your child's teacher says or does that suggest his/her trust in his/her students' abilities, such as choosing to assign challenging work or activities. I will also look for evidence of the degree of control over and responsibility for learning that the teacher gives to the students. For example, if your child's teacher gives his/her students choices or uses an inquiry-based curriculum, he/she is turning over some of the responsibility for learning to the students.

The project in which your child has been invited to participate will not require any time out of class and is not expected to have a direct influence on your student. However, there may be an indirect influence because your child's teacher is aware of the

focus of this study and will engage in regular reflection about the ways in which he/she is promoting agency among students. Any influence on your child, therefore, will be as a result of shifting teacher practices. Although your child will not be engaging directly with me as a researcher, I will be making notes about teacher-student interactions and making audio recordings of the classes which I observe. Therefore, I want to emphasize that the decision about participation is yours.

All children's identities are considered confidential and individual children's words or actions will not be shared with identifying information. Only children in MR./MS.'s classes who have parental permission, and who themselves agree to participate, will be involved in the study. Also, children or parents may withdraw their permission at any time during the study without penalty by indicating this decision to the researcher. There are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Carolina. In addition, it has the support of the principal at your child's school. However, the final decision about the participation is yours. Should you have any concerns or comments resulting from your child's participation in this study, please contact me via email at jstowe@email.sc.edu.

I would appreciate it if you would permit your child to participate in this project, as I believe it will contribute to furthering our knowledge of teacher practices promoting agency. Please complete the attached permission form, whether or not you give permission for your child to participate, and return it to the school by DATE**.**

If you have any questions about the study, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please feel free to contact me at

jstowe@email.sc.edu or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Stephens at stephens.diane@gmail.com**.** Thank you in advance for your interest and support of this project.

Sincerely,

Jennifer V. Stowe

PhD Candidate, Language and Literacy

Department of Instruction and Teacher Education

University of South Carolina

Consent Form – Child

I have read the information letter concerning the research project entitled *Fostering Agency in Single-Gender, Middle Level ELA Classrooms: A Descriptive Multiple-Case Study* conducted by Jennifer V. Stowe of the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and receive any additional details I wanted about the study.

I acknowledge that all information gathered on this project will be used for research purposes only and will be considered confidential. I am aware that permission may be withdrawn at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

I realize that this project has been reviewed by and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Carolina, and that I may contact this office if I have any comments or concerns about my child's involvement in the study.

If I have any questions about the study I can feel free to contact the researcher Jennifer V. Stowe at jstowe@email.sc.edu.

☐ Yes – I would like my child to participate in this study

☐ No – I would not like my child to participate in this study

Child's Name **(please print)** _____

Child's Birth Date _____ Gender of Child ____ Male ____ Female

Parent or Guardian Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Title _PhD Candidate _____ Department __ITE _____

Faculty Advisor Signature _____ Date _____

Faculty Advisor Title _____Department_____

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH TIMETABLE

Table C.1 Approximate Research Timetable

Research Component	Approximate time-frame
Participant recruitment	Late January through early February 2018
Classroom pre-visits & initial teacher interviews	Late February 2018
Classroom observations & weekly follow-up interviews	Early February through mid-April 2018
Final teacher interview	Late April 2018
Data Analysis & Member Checking	Data was analyzed throughout the collection process so that findings could be used to shape on-going research. Member checking occurred weekly during the observation period. Final coding began after data collection and was be completed by February 2019.
Total Study Time Approximately 1 year	